





# In Moments of Madness

An Anthology of  
Dark Fantasy & Strange Tales

Edited by The Egregore

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Fantasy & Strange Tales”

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*Careful what you wish for!*  
*You might get it....*



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## Introduction

The stories in this anthology are written around a theme. That theme is to explore the things in this world that are not considered 'normal' manifestations of how we routinely define our various realities. Most of us have had some sort of experience that we would call paranormal, surreal or just plain weird. These experiences leave us with more questions than they answer, begging for explanations that never come...and never will. They are experiences that cross a fine line between sanity and what might be perceived as madness; between our dreams and our waking life; between myth and the mundane. We are left wondering what really happened...if it really happened, or if we just dreamed it.

Such experiences are these, encoded into this collection of fine stories. You will meet beings out of ancient lore and mythology who live on in our collective imaginations and never die. Each new generation takes their stories, giving them new life and new perspectives. You will find yourself in a world of dreams, visions and magick that will haunt you, long after you've put the book down. Is Strayker crazy, or for real? Was Jackie dreaming? What really happened to Herbert Morse? Was the dream of her lover the same as the dream of the Captive? You'll meet them all and more, in their moments of madness.

The Egregore...erm..Editor



# Footprints in the Sand

by Frances Jones

*"I think anybody who tries to control the spiritual world is going to make a mess of it, because these spiritual forces and entities don't want to be controlled. They will come in, pretend to be helpful, and then take over themselves." (Rev. Tom Willis)*

"Raph, would you pay attention for five bloody minutes?" Mike shouted.

The noise warned Raph in just enough time to duck the half-full bottle that was sailing in an arc toward his head. It smashed against the wall behind him, showering warm beer and broken glass across Raph's back, the sofa where he was reclining, and the tiger's-eye-colored six-string bass guitar resting in his lap.

"The fuck'd you do that for?" Raph shouted back, shaking beer from his tangled, dark hair. He grabbed a t-shirt from the floor, sniffed it to make sure it was somewhat clean, and gingerly dried his bass.

"We've been trying to nail this take for the past six hours and you're off in fucking la-la land," said Mike, hands on his hips. His black Les Paul guitar dangled from its guitar strap like an oversized necklace.

"Sorry, man," Raph said. He stood and eyed Gabe and Uri, both of whom sat quietly watching the tension unroll. "Just ... haven't been sleeping well lately."

"Yeah, well, if you could just focus, we'd be out of here and you can get all the sleep your pretty little heart desires," Mike said, toeing his distortion pedals. "Stop fucking wasting our time."

"Right." Raph put his hands on the bass' strings and walked back to the microphone, kicking tangles of cord out of his way.

"What's with you?" Mike asked. "You're not even going to fight back?"

Raph shook his head. "Let's do this."

Their band, the Archangels, had come here to Boleskine House by the shores of Loch Ness three months ago, in May, to write and record a new album. The Archangels' last release, "Nadir," was their sixth – and lived up to its name entirely too well, representing the lowest point since the London band had rocketed to popularity 10 years ago.

"Nadir" had started off well enough, but after Gabe was caught backstage getting too close with an underage groupie – caught by the groupie's father, no less – the media shit-storm began. Then, rumors circulated that the first single, "Riding the Goat," was either a reference to Satanism and drug-use or to bestiality. The public hadn't particularly cared which one was accurate, or if either one was.

Promoters began canceling shows. Radio stations stopped playing the Archangels' music. A parents' group in Milwaukee pulled copies of "Nadir" from local record-store shelves and burned them on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. The press ate it up. There had been nothing left to do but cancel their American tour and return to the UK, angry and baffled and grieving their aborted gigs.

For two years, the Archangels had been silent.

This new album was meant to be their comeback – proof that the world hadn't crushed the band once hailed as the first to bring mainstream attention to speed metal. The Archangels had kept their plans a secret, along with the location of their recording sessions. Boleskine – with its long history of occult activity, from Aleister Crowley to Jimmy Page – would create just the atmosphere Archangel's musicians craved, but it could also trigger another witch-hunt if the public found out.

Raph had been the one to suggest it. And, just as the band kept its location a secret, Raph kept a secret from Mike, Gabe and Uri. He was attempting the same six-month-long ritual Crowley had attempted while living at Boleskine in 1899, one designed to call forth one's personal guardian angel. The angel would help him find his true purpose and aim for his ultimate destiny. Besides which, after "Nadir," Raph figured the band could use a little extra protection. Maybe this angel could help there, too.

From the first morning of their arrival, Raph had prayed at sunset and sunrise, slathered his body in a supposedly magical oil that stunk of cinnamon and myrrh. He gave up drinking, much to the chagrin of his bandmates,

whose favorite activity after a recording session was to pile into the half-rusted farmhouse truck and speed up General Wade's to Inverness, get smashed at the pub, and attempt to drive home without causing a multi-fatality vehicle accident.

Raph was also supposed to give up sex for the duration of the working. As there were no women at Boleskine, that hadn't been much of an issue.

Until a week ago.

During his dusk prayers, Raph had been standing by the loch shore with his eyes shut tight when he heard a female voice whispering. At first, he couldn't hear what she was saying, but as he listened carefully, he heard her say, "Closer."

Raph opened his eyes. The last dregs of sunset light were painted across the ripples in the water, temporarily blinding him. He stepped forward and heard the voice say "closer" again.

"If I go any farther, I'm gonna fall in," he said, feeling ridiculous.

He leaned down. Through the peat-clouded water he thought he saw something flash past beneath the surface, something big and swimming fast. Startled, Raph nearly lost his footing on the slippery bank. He crouched and leaned further, peering into the loch.

Suddenly Raph was in the water, several meters from the shore and at least twice his height beneath the surface. His shirt was snagged on something that pulled him rapidly through the gray loch. Raph was so surprised by

the speed and strength of his captor that it took him nearly a minute to realize he didn't need to breathe.

Just as abruptly, Raph was flung from the loch onto a tiny island studded with trees. He sat up on his elbows, blinking hard. A woman slowly emerged from the lake as though she were walking into a high-class party. She was thoroughly naked, but she advanced as though she didn't notice this fact. In the failing light, Raph could see that her flesh was dark and stippled. Lakewater streamed from her breasts and thighs as she moved.

She stepped across Raph, placing her bare feet on either side of his thighs. During the day, this would have afforded him a clear view of the valley between her legs, but now that valley was shadowed. She nearly blended in with the black silhouettes of the hills on the far shore of the lake, but Raph could track her by the dim light that glinted off her wet skin.

Raph tried to raise up. She placed her foot on his chest gently -- no more than a suggestion that he should not move. He stayed where he was. The woman crouched over him, bringing her face inches from his, and studied him intently from this close range.

Her proximity filled Raph with an oppressive gloom, much like the atmosphere at Boleskine House the day the Archangels had arrived. However, unlike Boleskine's watchful stoicism, the woman -- who was now examining Raph's frilled button-down shirt and worn black jeans with eager hands -- also stoked his body and brain with a painful heat he hadn't known since the first time he'd been naked with a girl. Her touch made him want to hand himself over and never look back.

Tentatively he raised his hands and touched them to the woman's skin. It felt entirely unlike human flesh; it was cold, firm, and slick, completely without hair.

She leaned down and pressed her mouth to Raph's. Her cool tongue darted between his teeth, tasting of moss and ozone. Raph kissed back, pleasure overtaking his sense of trepidation. He sat up so that the woman straddled his lap, and wrapped one arm around her shoulders. She kissed him more deeply still, aided by the fact that she was not breathing.

Raph was no stranger to the creatures who came backstage after a rock show, seeking encounters they could brag about later over mugfuls of Miller Lite. In fact, he'd become something of a connoisseur of quirky girls. His bandmates could keep the classic groupies, the plastic Barbie bombshells with their pancake makeup and fried-blond hair. He preferred the unusual girls – the ones with monolithic noses or fences of uneven teeth, the ones with thick scars on their wrists (or, once, across her throat!). Raph would find one of these women, lead her into the candlelight of his dressing room, strip her down, and worship her.

Raph kissed the loch-woman until the night went completely black. Only then did she pull away and reach down to his fly. Just as he moved to help her, she unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, and with cold hands freed his organ, stiff and noticeably hot against her cool palms.

"You've done this before," he murmured.

Her eyes flashed, catching the starlight, but she did not speak.



Only when her chilled mouth closed around the tip of his cock, tongue swirling it like a tiny whirlpool, did Raph remember his rite. Chastity. If he let this woman touch him, his future and the future of the Archangels would be trashed.

“Stop! Stop! I can't,” Raph gasped, bracing his hands firmly against the woman's shoulders. “I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to. Please.”

Somewhere in his head, he heard her laughing.

“I am the one you seek,” she whispered. “I am the one you pray will come.”

Before Raph could question her, she returned to her ministrations, sucking him deeply down her loch-wet throat. Heat shot through him, a desire so tremendous that his hands and feet ached with it. His stomach knotted with longing.

Her tongue snaked around his cock, pulling deep shudders from Raph as he surrendered himself to the woman. He reached down to cradle her head, which was blanketed by a thick fur, and pulled himself deeper into her. When he thrust his hips against her, she did not resist.

Raph screamed as he came, white fire searing his veins. He let go of the woman and held his own head in his hands, shuddering and bucking on the earth.

“Fuck, that was -- ” Raph started to say, but he heard a noise in the water. When he opened his eyes, it was clear that she had gone.

“Too much,” he finished.

It took him several minutes to recover. When he could, Raph stood and fastened his jeans. He looked out across the loch. Nothing but inky water, inky mountains and star-spattered inky sky lay ahead. He made a quick circuit around the island, confirming that there was no boat, nor a bridge to nearby land. It was too dark to swim, and Raph now feared what else might rest beneath those waters.

Instead, he curled up on the ground and napped slow hours until dawn broke across the eastern hills. Once the sun came, Raph saw that the island was only a handful of meters from the shore and felt silly for waiting. He quickly made his morning prayers, then took to the water.

The swim to shore took less than a minute. From there, he hiked down the A82 until he rounded the southern tip of the loch, and then hitched a ride up General Wade's to the house.

He had expected the sight of Boleskine to be a relief, but as he approached the house, it felt repellent, even hostile. Raph shuddered and stepped through the front door. Despite the early hour, his bandmates were up, clustered in the kitchen around a pile of steaming pancakes and mugs of tea.

“Where the bloody hell have you been?” Mike asked before looking up. Once he did, his expression changed from irritation to worry. “Jesus. You look awful.”

“I got lost by the lake. Sort of.”

Gabe's nose was buried in his laptop, where he was watching some kind of documentary. "A complex and demanding magical rite ... this was to have unfortunate and unintended consequences, both for Boleskine and for Crowley himself," the voice-over on the video explained.

"Why are you watching that trash?" Raph asked. He hoped his protests wouldn't give him away.

"You aren't the only one who had a bad night," Mike said, noodling with his Les Paul, which lay in his lap. "Gabe's doing us some research."

Raph pulled out a chair and sat down in it. He helped himself to two pancakes, spreading them with butter, lemon juice, and sugar before rolling them up and eating them with his hands.

"Research? What happened?" He asked, still chewing. As he reached for more food, Mike poured him a cup of tea. Raph guzzled it gratefully.

"I was just getting to sleep last night when I heard this bizarre snuffling noise under my door," Uri said, setting his mug down with a thunk. "I flicked on the light, thinking it would stop, but it only got louder and louder. Sounded like a bloody bear or something."

"Or your ex-wife," Mike teased. Uri snapped a dishtowel at him.

"We knew plenty about this house before we came here," said Gabe, looking up from the computer screen. "That same stuff happened to Crowley, too. If anything, it's a surprise that nothing happened sooner."

Raph chewed thoughtfully and drank his tea. Its warmth made him feel almost human again.

“Did Crowley ever learn what caused all that weird shit to happen to him here?” Raph asked.

“Duh,” Gabe responded. “It was probably that weird ritual he was working on.”

Raph closed his eyes, hoping to disguise his dread.

“So nothing ... odd ... happened to you out there?” Mike asked, eying Raph briefly before returning his attention to the Les Paul.

“No.”

Mike began picking out a fast-paced melody. He repeated it several times, bowing his head low over the fretboard as he did when he was deep in concentration. The others knew this posture well: It was usually followed by Mike shouting excitedly.

“I’ve got it! The next track! Come on, lads, let’s head to the parlor so we can lay it down,” Mike said. He stood so suddenly that his chair nearly fell over, and marched from the kitchen without making sure the others were following. They were.

By the time Raph returned to his favorite couch and pulled his bass from its case on the floor, Mike was already feeding licks through the amplifiers so the others could hear. He wasn’t always the first one to come up with a new song, but his instrument most often drove the melodies, and he was more prolific than the others. They were accustomed to following his lead.

Even so, in their three months at Boleskine, the Archangels had only managed to write and record a handful of new songs – much fewer than they had hoped, considering they only had a six-month lease.

Mike's new track came together as easily as breathing, as easily as writing their first album, back when making music was still a physical need as plain as hunger.

The hours flowed quickly into the afternoon. The Archangels practiced the new tune dozens of times while Gabe sketched out the lyrics, usually a painstaking process that could take him days or weeks.

“I don't know where this is coming from,” Gabe said, looking up once from his notebook as he continued to write. “But you're going to love it.” An hour later, when he howled the new words along to the well-polished melodies, Raph's stomach fluttered. This was *good*.

They played it once more, for keeps this time. When the last notes were done, the Archangels sat in awed silence as Mike flicked off the DAT recorder and sat back in his chair. Without speaking, they went to their separate quarters – most to sleep off the night's unsettling events and the day's work.

For six days, this new routine settled over the band. Each evening, as Raph went to pray by the loch and watch the sun sink behind the mountains, the woman in the water would drag him away. Her ministrations were always the same, though Raph's orgasms increased in intensity and he longed to fuck her, to set a fire in her like the one she had wakened in him.

When Raph returned in the morning, Mike's muse would surface once more, bringing song after song to his guitar. In a week, the Archangels had recorded seven tracks. With the few they'd written before, the new material gave them just enough for the album they had come to Boleskine to create.

Raph couldn't help but think that his magic was working.

No strange noises woke Uri or the others during the night, but Boleskine by no means stayed quiet. One morning, Raph stepped from his bedroom onto the terrace on the north side of the house, where a fine sand had drifted across the flagstones. In the sand he saw a series of footprints – made by bare feet small enough to be a woman's – that led from the hedgerow to the bedroom door. Had the loch-woman spied on him?

Raph shuddered. And that was before he picked out a second set of prints in the sand – something four-legged and large, much too large to be anybody's stray pet.

Despite the morning sunlight, Raph suddenly felt darkness closing in around him. When he looked up, dozens of shadowy shapes, the size of humans, hovered at the edge of his vision. If he turned to see them directly, they vanished.

Raph shook his head and rubbed his eyes.

“Too little sleep – must be getting to me,” he said to himself.

When he tried the door to the bedroom, the knob stuck.

"Have you got any other clichés you'd like to try on me?" He shouted at the figures behind him. After a second and third twist of the knob, the door opened.

"Damned house," he muttered, stomping the sand from his shoes and shutting the door.

"Who the bloody hell are you talking to out there?" Mike called from the foyer, two rooms away.

"Bugger off," Raph replied, too quietly for Mike to hear. "And you bugger off, too," he said over his shoulder to the shadows outside.

Raph was silent through breakfast and well into the afternoon's recording session. He couldn't shake the irritation and anger from his mind, nor could he lose the feeling of those figures circling around him. He sat on the couch, trying to collect himself into something resembling coherence, while the others brainstormed the name of the Archangels' new record.

"We could call it 'Boleskine,'" Gabe suggested.

"Too obvious. Did Led Zeppelin call their countryside album 'Bron-Y-Aur?'" Mike asked sarcastically. "No, they called it 'Led Zeppelin III.'"

"We can't call ours 'Led Zeppelin III,' then," Uri smirked.

"What about 'House?'" Mike said.

"Aside from the fact that that's already the name of a television program, it's really not very heavy metal," Gabe said, rolling his microphone back and forth in his hands.

"Raph!" Mike shouted. "Don't make me throw another beer at you, man. Do you have any ideas?"

Sitting up made the shadows in Raph's vision retreat, just a little. He rested his elbows on his thighs and rubbed his face. "I don't know. How about 'The Devil's Lake?'"

His bandmates sat back, testing the name in their minds.

"Just so we're clear – Crowley didn't worship the Devil," Gabe said.

"Who said anything about Crowley?" Mike asked.

"I like it," Uri said.

Mike and Gabe nodded.

"Me too. Let's sleep on it. Take the night off, lads," Mike said.

"We always take the night off!" Uri replied.

"Right. Well, anyone want to go to the pub? I'll get the keys to the truck," Mike said, disappearing from the room. Gabe and Uri rose; Raph remained, head in hands, on the couch.

"You coming, mate?" Gabe asked.

Raph shook his head. "Sorry, man. I'm feeling a bit weird. Have a pint for me, eh?"

"Deal," Gabe winked.



Raph kept his perch until long after the others had sped off, long after the sunbeams traced their way across the expensive rugs and faded. Dusk called him to pray by the banks of Loch Ness. Tonight, he prayed for his lover to come, and for the band's new album to make everyone in the world forget all the bullshit and bad press once associated with the Archangels' name.

It wasn't until the last sliver of sun slipped behind the hills that her head emerged from the water. Raph had never seen the loch-woman in this much light. Her irises were black, while the whites of her eyes were as gray as the waters behind her. Now he could see her head, covered with fur like a seal's pelt; it reminded him of women like Grace Jones or Annie Lennox. Her face was angular and broad, but pretty, and more than a little bit equine.

Raph's cock stirred as his mind flooded with images: kissing her. Embracing her so fiercely he feared crushing her. Mounting her, sliding inside her. Would she come? Would she scream when she did?

He stepped into the water, which was shallow near the shore. As he walked, the water rose to his knees, his thighs, his chest. He stood face-to-face with the woman and reached out to glide one hand against the curve of her waist, the mound of her hip. Instead of towing him quickly through the loch, as he expected she would, she closed the space between them and brushed her lips against his.

If the water was cold around them, Raph didn't feel it.

"Where shall we go tonight, love?" He asked. She didn't speak.

Raph tipped his head toward Boleskine. "Want to go in there?"

Her eyes widened. She nodded.

Raph grasped her hand and walked out of the loch, mud sucking at his boots. She followed, water sluicing from her body as they moved the short distance to the massive front door. Raph removed his shoes before ushering the woman inside.

In the foyer, she looked around. Rather than inspecting the rooms and furniture, she looked at the spaces between them, as though she were looking for someone. She followed Raph into his bedroom.

By the bed, Raph kissed her again. But when he tried to pull her down onto the blankets, she resisted, her whole body tensing beneath her dark skin. She looked through the glass door to the terrace, where Raph had seen the shadows earlier. If they were there now, they blended with the deeper shadows of twilight. But the loch-woman seemed to be tracking something, and was moving her lips subtly, as if whispering, though she made no sound.

"Who are you looking for? What's out there?" Raph asked.

She looked back at Raph, but did not reply. Her mouth spread into something he thought might be a smile.

"I saw them too," he continued. "But you know what they are, don't you."

She let go of his hand and went to stand against the wall, her legs parted. The sight of her silhouetted there thrilled

Raph, who crossed the room and pressed the length of his body against hers. Electricity coursed between them, and Raph forgot about the shadows.

He kissed her forcefully, grinding his mouth against hers. The cool feel of her tongue, now familiar, made him shiver. Raph reached down and brushed his hand against the black slit between the loch-woman's thighs. When she did not protest, he traced his fingers into her slick valley, back and forth. He sought the same pleasure-filled nub that human women have, but found none. Yet, like those women, she possessed a deep channel to her womb. As he sank his fingers into her, she gasped and fluttered her eyelids. Though the rest of her was cold, this place held a subtle, inviting heat.

Raph drew kisses down her jaw, her throat, and across her shoulders. As he planted each one, he whispered, "Thank you. Thank you for taking me. Thank you for hearing my prayers. Thank you for bringing music to this house."

He stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned his pants, letting his cock sway free. Raph guided himself into her, moaning at the feel of her strong cunt surrounding him. He lifted her, holding her firmly by the flesh of her ass, and braced her against the wall. As she wrapped her legs around him, Raph heard a high, keening wail inside his head – desire and madness at once – that he was certain came from her.

Raph tried to thrust slowly, to savor this, but he wanted it too badly. His hips slammed against her, again and again, arousal turning to pain and back. No release would be potent enough to quench this thirst, which grew even as he moved inside her. He was sure of it.

She kissed Raph sharply, teeth biting into his lips, and the sting sent him reeling. With one final thrust Raph exploded into her, nerves singing with electricity. He growled and gasped as he came, pressing into her, leaning, trying not to collapse to the floor. The loch-woman casually lowered her legs and released him. Raph stumbled to the bed, where he collapsed onto his back.

He waited for her to come to his side, but she didn't. Finally, he lifted his head. She stood just where he'd left her, leaning against the wall, watching him.

"Now you are mine," she said. The side door blew open, sand and shadows whisking into the room, while the loch-woman strode out to the terrace and let the night take her.

The dark figures swarmed around Raph, crowding his senses and drinking his memories.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Archangels abandoned Boleskine three months early, since "The Devil's Lake" was complete. Mike and Gabe guided post-production mixing in London, and the album was released on Oct. 31, just in time for the gift-giving season. Its launch propelled speed metal, impossibly, onto mainstream radio; 7 of the album's 12 tracks hit the Top 10 in every English-speaking country on Earth.

Stories of Raph's steep descent into madness only fanned the media flames. As his bandmates chatted and performed, with a new guest bass player, on television programs from BBC to MTV, Raph sat frozen and

unresponsive in the guest room in his parents' Newbury Park house. As the Archangels traveled the world, playing gigs that drew tens of thousands of new fans, Raph remained drowned in the peat-clouded waters of Loch Ness, searching for his lover.

When Mike, Gabe and Uri came to visit, Raph didn't speak or look at them. They hung their platinum copy of "The Devil's Lake," framed in glittering black, on his wall before leaving. His mother thanked them for coming, and asked them to return – in case their presence would somehow tow her son back from the depths.

Only two phrases looped in Raph's mind, two phrases that kept him locked away.

"You aren't who you said you were," Raph says, his voice wavering in the dark loch.

"No," she replies. "But you got what you prayed for."



## Perspective Nineteen

by Kimberly Sue

Sit down, I won't bite. You ain't evil. If you was, then I would bite. *Hard.*

Aw c'mon now, I ain't that stupid! I don't do none of God's work in public.

Sit down lawyer boy! I'm your client right? You gotta hear what I have to say to make your case right? Then get your rump comfy and sit!

Good.

Hmmm...whatcha got there boy? My files? I reckon they be full of lies, them papers. Can I see 'em?

What do you mean no!?! Confidentially, my ass, son! Y'all talking about me. Fine!

All you big school folk the same. High and mighty! Well, I gotta truth to tell you. In the grand scheme of things, you ain't nothing at all!

What's that? Am I religious?! No, I ain't no religious man  
- not in the church-going sense.

Y'all want to talk to God you go outside, in the woods, in  
the mountains and you can see, feel, and know God right  
there. Ain't need for no church, no organized faith,  
nothing like that.

And you know what lawyer man? God likes it like that.  
He don't need no singing and wailing, and sitting on  
them hard oak bench things for hours on end. Just  
actions. And love.

No-what now?

So why it is that God wanted me to serve him? Y'all want  
to know. Yup, that'll help your case. Haw! Yes, right, *my*  
case.

Back to the question, why me then? Why the Lord chose  
me, Strayker Isaiah Masterson - a man of the  
Appalachian range and some Southern bits? Got me kin  
from Texas, Kentucky and yonder, too. Hmmm, I reckon  
maybe, just maybe God knowed I was the only one who  
could go and done kill evil the ways I do. I reckon that  
was it.

And here's what I do know, no reckoning yonder. Hell I  
done know! Up close and personal. Up-your-nose  
personal, lawyer man. See now, what God gone and had  
me done? Well my thing, it's consuming evil.

What? Y'all don't understand me? Then shut your trap  
and listen boy!



See now, I lay my hand on the table for you to see. God chose me for this cause he said something about me being a Soldier. Yeah, he talked to me like Moses and the burning bush thing. What kind of soldier? A Soldier of Numeration! Yes, that's what I said! How you gonna learn if you keep yapping like that. Shit! Y'all worse than a mamma hog in heat with all that yammering.

Look here! See this mark on my right hand? That's a symbol of my calling.

What?! No! That ain't no ritual tattoo. Please...

Look close! Closer than that son, the details! Go on now, look! It's a birthmark. Are you in there, Mister Ivy League? What you gawking at, anyways? There ain't nothing in my room, them walls like hard pillows, nothing but dirty white walls. Them authorities done saw to that. Ah ha! No wonders you ain't paying no attention, you got your peepers on the Death's head grafted onto my goggles here. HAW! All but fainting at the sight of my skull. Stop, it's nice that I known, or wise it wouldn't be on my goggles, blocking the fake light from my eyes which grown sensitive. But you spend all your time holding your belly and looking at the skull on my goggles, and talking about nothing. You ain't listening, no sir. What kind of attorney don't heed the words of their client? What they teach in you that lawyer's school anyway?

*None of my business!* It is my business if y'all gonna represent me. It IS! There! See I lifted them goggles up, so y'all have to stare at my eyes not my skull! Heh. You just won't give up on this...! So why they let me wear it you say? Them fools couldn't get the skull off my head. I don't think they wanted to touch it really. So they said,

but I done think they don't want to see my eyes. Babies at their mamma's teat. Scared. They known I ain't lying. They known I'm not some drunken kook who gone and outdone Elmer Fudd in the hunting department.

Yup, I can see. More than you can possibly fathom in that big school edgy-cated head of yours. You sitting there in front of me, in your neat hair-do and Sunday best fancy suit. Them threads there tailored by some snooty city - dwelling foreigner. A person who probably charges some folks life savings for one dang suit. I-talian right? Uh-huh. You sitting there frowning at this golden hair, the prophet's beard and my white eyes, and that skull. Now you pretending you ain't looking at it. Haw! Y'all sure enjoy my room. Maybe we can get you a place in here too. What you think of that boy?! Shit! I don't need furniture anyways.

What you mean what I am talking about? Y'all ever sleep on the grass, under the stars? With the sky as the roof and entertainment, and just wonder? Just sucking in that fresh air? Hearing all them things that live in the wild? You know how many birds fly in the Rockies son?

No? Too bad.

How does this explain me? Heh. Y'all mean - how can it help you, and would I stop picking on you, right?

Y'all don't like the truth, do ya? Well you ain't gonna like this much better. Listen boy, listen good. I really don't want to go into this, but there ain't no other way.

Now, it's about the Neco Prodigium, that of which I'm a member. You gotta know. The world must know! Some anyway. I ain't gonna tell you much, especially where

they be situated. But know this, them Soldiers inside the Prodigium - *I am one*. Both men and divine, we are. Each of us consigned to destroy evil in a unique way. Remember that gal, Joan of Arc, and the rebel Martin Luther? They were Soldiers of Numeration - soldiers of the Prodigium. Yup, Soldiers Eleven and Fifteen , respective. After Luther, there was a big drop off. I won't be surprised if Buddha and Mohammed were a part of this too. I don't right known the whole list. Only right if they was. But like I was saying after Luther - if God gone and blessed one folk per century with this weighty task of hunting evil - that was a lot.

I'm Soldier Nineteen.

Born just over two hundred years ago. Yup. Two-zero-zero... Shut your trap! Listen!

Another Prodigium lady, dear Soldier Twenty she ain't made it past World War One.

Soldier Twenty-Two that good ol' Russian holy man, Father Effromovitch, he gone and I think died as we recovered the Spear of Destiny from some Satan fuckers, when I been arrested. Effrom was the one, and I don't known if he made it or not. But the irony of me being arrested. Haw!

I gone and done this for almost two centuries without a single hitch and now, I got me a sterile little room with hard pillow walls and no windows. Sitting here while evil runs rampant outside. Stuck like a truck in a ditch. Y'all see the error in this. *You will*. When them dark fiends come prowling and making Hell alive. Making it manifest yonder. Y'all see. Y'all come pleading to me.

You hearing me? *I am the last mortal defense against evil in this world!* The last before Soldier One, Two and Three - God's Son-sweet Christ - and the embodiment of the Trinity come back down to kick the devil child and his poppa back to Hell.

Y'all be listening to me? Huh? No...no, you're looking at your fancy time piece there. What they call it? Rolohe...slave to the money. You don't know riches until you lived free of society, in the wilderness.

Not in some box of steel, glass and that concrete crap. You ain't even living with no trees around you and the sky as your roof. With God as your co-pilot, and nothing holding you down, just you and nature. Life fulfilled.

Heh-heh! I offended you. Calling it true, didn't I? You ain't nothing Mister Attorney!

I seen that. I known that. It's all in your aura - your spirit center.

Y'all be judging me, before you even known me. Y'all don't see the good I done. Now, then, and in the future. Nope, y'all don't see that at all.

Oh you're noddin that gourd of yours like it's all okay. Thinking sure, Mister Strayker, I believe every cotton-picking word you say, swear to the Almighty....

But you don't pray, you don't tell no truths to no one. Not to Southern folk, not to no Yankees neither. Just thinking you can't wait 'til the trial be gone and done. How much I blemish your perfect ways. How embarrassing this whole case is to you. Haw!

Keeping nodding like the slave to the money that you is.  
Shut that trap, close that jaw lawyer boy! Yeah I told you,  
I can see the good and the evil in every single being and  
place.

I can read you like a book. And your book is cub-level  
easy. Get in the cracks and between the lines. I can! See  
here man, your aura is yellow, scared. Chicken shit,  
yellow-bellied...run home to mamma you would!

Well it *ain't about me* lawyer man. It's about this whole  
world. It's about saving children from darkness  
complete.

You there? You get me!?!

Stop twitching with that devil walkie-talkie telephone,  
listen! Woe be you Mister fancy pants! Y'all already have  
your gourd made up on me. Crazy ol' Strayker, wearing  
that skull on them goggles, with his blonde-silver hair  
and prophet's beard, white skin and rundown clothes,  
with them white eyes like he's blind.

Yeah, Strayker here: Telling you tales so tall making, Paul  
Bunyan look like a midget. Yup, y'all got your mind set  
good on me: I'm a backwoods inbred freak!

You'll just plead insanity on my known behalf won'tcha?  
Haw! The joke's on you, lawyer boy! You'll just plead  
that my story of the divine, and good and evil is just an  
insane man's ruse to get off the hook for my consumption  
of tainted souls, man flesh and blood.



# Woke up Hungry

by Mushroom

she woke up hungry  
ravenous  
the refrigerator a cold crypt  
empty of forgotten tangents  
that wait for their brief moment in the light  
her mind darted through the room in panic  
there were no possibilities  
she dressed quickly  
flying desperately toward the door  
driven by some deep need to consume  
out into the hallway of the apartment building  
then "what?"  
like being smacked by a velvet hammer  
the strangest thing ...  
all up and down the hall were banquet tables  
covered in white linen and heaped with food  
not just food, piles of gourmet delicacies  
on silver trays  
huge fresh strawberries, sliced kiwi and watermelon  
pastries, brownies and cupcakes  
salivating with anticipation

but wait ...  
this is not right  
the waiters were all chimpanzees dressed in tuxedos  
behaving with the manners of an english butler  
carrying trays of bananas  
maybe a neighbor ...  
then she noticed her neighbors apartment doors were  
gone ...  
as if they never existed  
all too strange, she forgot her hunger  
a dream perhaps ?  
she ran down the stairs and into the street  
it looked like her little red car, yet ... different  
it seemed to be made of a hard candy shell over ...  
chocolate ? licorice-like tires ...  
no, definitely a dream  
looking around for some real person  
a human being to compare realities ...  
no one.  
back up she ran, past the tables  
past the monkeys, past the baklava  
into the apartment and slammed the door

"Jackie ! where did you go ? I've made breakfast for you!  
French Toast, fresh strawberries and a Mimosa ..."

"Who are you - how did you get in here ?"

about to freak out, she thought,

'O.K., this is some crazy dream,

I may as well go along with it'

She sat down and inhaled the food..

"Where did you learn to cook like that ? Mr ... uh,

I didn't catch your name"

"Mushroom. You can call me Mushroom.

Sorry to startle you,



but you were having some crazy dream  
and I just wanted to make you breakfast.  
Would you like some coffee too ?"



## Rebirth (of Humanity)

by Israel J. Rose

*"As it is my presence, which is always here and now, that gives the quality of actual to any event, I must be beyond time and space. I was never born, nor will ever die." (Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj – "I Am That")*

Near an ancient shrine that sat on the banks of the River Ganges, five *sadhus* sat in the form of a wheel – a *chakra*. Their *guru*, the lady Sadhvi Abha was a disciple of the holy man called Ramakrishna. With the small group of her own followers, she was the axis - the heart of the wheel and the sixth *chakra*. The wheel was incomplete. I sat outside the group, the seventh *chakra*, untested.

I felt myself fortunate to have found such a teacher, and one that would accept me. Coiled in the customary lotus position, I studied her dark serene gaze through my white man's blue eyes – studying the features of my *guru-ji*. The others there faded in comparison to her – a radiant incarnation of the Great Mother, Herself.

Tests...I know all about tests. My mother wished for me to become a priest back in England, but I found myself here in Bengal, India - one of the Bengal Lancers. I'd done more than my fair share of time in the North-West Frontier, fighting to maintain the security of the borderlands. Ah yes, I knew all about physical hardship

and the pain of wounds suffered in skirmishes with people I would sooner embrace and call brother. It pained me greatly to be what I was, but it had afforded me this chance – the chance to become more than I was.

“It is nothing, Highgate,” Abha calls to me. “No, English, it is nothing. Now you must travel to meet yourself. Come.”

“Great Mother, what do you see when you close your eyes?” Laughter greeted my question – the laughter of the *sadhus*.

“I see peace...peace and a thousand ways to achieve it. I return the question to you, now. What do you see when you close your eyes, Agni?” Agni was the name she had given me. It was a great honour to have such a name, and I perceived that my companions resented it.

“He sees a ticket home, Abha-ji...to London! Is that not where you are from, Highgate?” The speaker was Pankaja, a burly northerner who resented change and the invasion of the English into his homeland.

“Your opinion is coloured by your hatred of those who have no heart but obey their masters without thought of the consequences, Pankaja.” Abha’s tones were light and airy as a wind chime, but firm. “He has come here of his own free will, and it is not your place to question.”

Pankaja was not abashed in the least. “Bah! He is only your pet. You think that you can make a holy man of an Englishman. At best he would be one of Kali’s thugs, a bandit and a murderer who should impale himself on his majesty’s sword.”

The sound of stifled laughter followed Pankaja's assessment.

"Silence." Her voice was barely a whisper, yet it was enough. Abha stood up, shattering the wheel. She came toward me.

"Great Mother, please..." I implored.

"Oh, he cries for you, Abha – your English baby, Ankur, the little sprout." Pankaja's taunting would not be stopped today. He was in a surly mood and not inclined to listen to Abha's gentle teachings of compassion and equilibrium.

"You mean Agni, don't you, Pankaja?" Abha was amazing to me. She never lost her composure - Abha, the light.

The man fell silent. His stormy gaze locked with hers as she stepped out of the circle formed by the others. Agni meant 'fire', but this was the English...an alien to their ways.

"How could this English be wise in our ways in a thousand years? Agni and Abha...fire and light. You treat him as if he were your child, doting on him like a mother." This was Rupī speaking. Pankaja's resentment infected them all.

"You are all my children, Rupī," Abha replied. "You are all brothers. So you should treat him."

"It's time we test your beloved Agni," Rupī barked. "Let his eye and his soul be tested, and let us see of what he is made!"

I don't remember going to confront my challenger, but I found myself standing over him now. I knew it would come – the day when I would be tested, but I hadn't dared to think it would be today. "Test me then," I defied him. "Then you will see for yourselves, and perhaps you will stop questioning Abha-ji's judgment." I gripped his shoulder – a gesture meant in friendship, but he glared at me and shrugged away.

"You have no idea of what you embark upon. NO idea of the darkness and the light...the unbearable light!" A third *sadhu* named Kavi spoke. He wagged an admonishing finger at me and shook his conch. "This symbolizes creation for us. Inside is the darkness, and you must find your way back to the light through the spirals of temptation and terror." He was the most eloquent of the lot. His name meant 'wise poet'. His parents had named him well.

"No Kavi, I do not know. But I believe it is my destiny and I have no fear. I have been through worse."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the silent twins watching me. Their failure to speak was almost worse than the taunts. What were they thinking?

"Worse, the English says! What do you know about *worse*!? You only know fantasy! This is the great romance of the white man to come to our land and believe that he can become wise because he wishes it!" Pankaja was suddenly facing me, his eyes blazing with a strange light. He slapped my brow with the butt of his palm.

Ripples appeared before my eyes...ripples, like water. I felt myself floating...swimming...swimming in the skies. Clouds...white and luminous, like mighty piles of fleece

and feathers. I remembered for a moment then, lying on my back as a child, staring at the skies and wondering what it would be like to play in the clouds. I had my wish in this now, and my entire life collapsed into it. I felt my body drift through them – something pushing me onward and upward.

The moment of joy passes, as the clouds begin to roil and the sky turns a dirty yellow-gray colour, like an old bruise. I'm engulfed in swirling masses of vapor that congeal into a great serpentine form with a myriad of hissing heads. Lightning flashes all around me and in one great burst of light, I see him...Him...the All-Pervader of the Universe. He is breathtakingly terrible to look upon. The radiance of the sun shines about him. I know now what Kavi meant by 'the unbearable light'. One of the serpentine heads dips downward beneath me, and I find myself suddenly being hurtled into the darkest depths of the heavens.

I am surrounded by a million suns being born and dying in tremendous paroxysms of energy. I become aware of a sound - a sound unlike any other. It is the beating hum of the heart of the cosmos, warping and churning before me. From its center, a form emerges, black as the deeps about me, yet radiant and fearfully primeval.

It is the beloved Mother of my teacher and my teacher's teacher, Kali-Ma, the Terrible One. Her tongue lolls over her dreadful teeth and her blood-drenched lips. Eyes, shining like chips of obsidian, pierce my very soul as she comes closer and closer. *Jai, jaya Kali-Ma!* She is the power of Time, which gives birth to and destroys all things. In two of her four hands, she holds a sword and a severed head. The other two show me the gestures of removing fear and granting boons. She dances upon the

corpses of a thousand ruined universes; a garland of more severed heads hangs upon her breast. Life and death are inseparable and in some ways, we must die to find life - Life eternal. Real Life, not this emptiness we call living. She is the ultimate warrior, and this realisation gives me strength. If my skull is meant to be added to her grisly necklace, then so be it. I feel myself divided – part of me is terrified of this vision of the primordial Mother. The other part is dumb-founded and feels entirely miniscule.

Somewhere in the far distance, I hear the whispers of my brothers floating in and out of my consciousness. As I watch Her, the Terrible One descends upon me with a blood-curdling shriek more frightening than that of any human berserker. An eternity passes and I feel myself lost in a void, but I do not break or bend. My own voice echoes in my head, "I have been through worse." It comes like a *mantra* to me now. The mists of eternal Time open, and the darkness falls away. I see my beloved Abha-ji smiling at me. She beckons to me to come to her.

I smile back, a secret fire burning inside me now. Kali-Ma is strong, and so is Abha, my *guru-ji*. I know now from whence it comes. Incongruously, I think of my own mother, who bore seven children. She too was strong and good.

Suddenly, I fall...fall before my earthly mother, who sacrificed everything for me - my dear mother, who wanted me to become a priest. It is as if the mere thought of her brings me back to a life that I know I will never see again. "What do you think of me, now, Mother?"

"I think you are grand, my son. You have become more than I ever dreamed for you in my limited



understanding. Now, now I see more than before, and I see that you are blessed. Live it, breathe it, child. I am so proud of you. I will always be."

Still finding myself with my feet in both worlds, it pleases that part of me that needed to hear this. Yet, I have come to realize that this good woman was merely a vehicle for my entry into this realm of flesh, and my true Mother is Kali-Ma, the Mother of us all. A door appears behind my dear departed mum. I smile at her as she turns to go, free now to rest in peace. She gives me her little stiff-handed queenly wave and recedes into the shadows.

I expect the door to close behind her, but all logic and rationale are lost in this place between worlds. My mum disappears, only to be replaced by six beautiful women dressed in swirling silks, gold and jewels. Their garb is coloured every hue of the rainbow. Their long, flowing tresses blow about their faces in a breeze that escapes my senses. They move closer to me and I think they look familiar. I am stunned when I finally recognize them. They are my sisters in the appearance of *apsaras*, heavenly beings of light and beauty. They crowd around me, as they often did when I was but a small lad, cooing and smiling. "Come, little brother!" They lead me back through the door, where our mum disappeared, but I suspect that the path I am now on does not lead me to that good place where mum returned.

We walk for what seems an eternity through a shadowed forest path littered with broken glass and the fading glimmer of crumpled dreams. My feet are bleeding, as my sisters float on either side of me giggling and chattering inanely about old times. They are heedless of my pain. In the darkness behind us, something follows -

something lapping up the trail of my blood. Nothing here remains. It is all ephemeral.

We come to what appears to be the ruins of an old palace, choked with great vines. Vermin scuttle amongst the leaves and serpents slither through the branches overhead. "Come, come, Winston!" They lead me inside, into a different sort of darkness.

"No, little brother, you are no priest. *You* are meant for greater things!" My sisters dance around me, removing my white linen shirt, snuggling all too close and blowing in my ears. The potent smells of their perfumes threaten to drown my senses. So many unpleasant smells like iodine, alcohol, ether and smelling salts. My head swims as they slither against me in a most un-sisterly fashion and begin removing their garments.

"Come, Winston! You can be so much more than some nasty, grubby madman roaming through the forest!"

"A duke! An earl."

"You're a hero, Winston. All those medals on your chest!"

They pull me down into the pile of their naked, writhing bodies. Pinned to my breast are the Victoria Cross and all those other bits of ribbon and brass. Blood oozes from the wounds.

"Don't you want to live, Winston?" It is Katherine, my eldest sister speaking, but her voice is deep as a man's.

"Surely, he will be well rewarded for his bravery!" This from Rebecca, but it is not the sound of her voice that I remember.

I see now that we are lying in a pile of gold coins and pound notes, jewels and baubles of gold and silver, as they sift these things through their nimble fingers, pouring them over me like a vile rain. I close my eyes wishing them away and find myself lying on a velvety lawn, covered in rose petals. The sound of guns firing echoes far, far away.

This moment of peace and bliss is short-lived, as I am pulled downward into the depths of an even darker scene. I am thrown before the feet of a sullen, pinch-faced man seated on a throne. I know that he is me, and what I'd become in this last year: hardened, bored and hateful; dissatisfied in the extreme with my lot in life. It was that very feeling I think, that drew Abha to me in my time of sorrow. Around me, I saw the people of this place, bound and shackled like so many animals. Behind him, Her Majesty claps her hands...a sneering old dowager empress, who can't even be bothered to visit those lands her soldiers have conquered.

My eldest sister Katherine appears once more at my side. She was always the persuasive one, egging me on to new tribulations and disasters, then laughing behind my back as I was punished for doing stupid things. She whispers in my ear, "Take the glory, little brother. You are meant to rule over these savage peasants. Mother never did understand why we came here." She lifted the head of a particularly pathetic local with a disgusted sneer, and then spat upon him.

I see myself then as a slave to ideals that mean nothing in the great expanse of time; a slave to Crown and country, risking my neck for principles that disgust me – the so-called superiority of the white man; the right to take and take, until there is nothing left and nothing to give in return.

I am appalled and I shrink from her, only to hear the familiar laughter of Rebecca. “Look at you! You’re just as pathetic as he is! Mother left this world hoping that we would all gain something of honour to God and make a place for ourselves by serving the Queen. You *have* the perfect opportunity here, Winston! Honour God and Her Majesty by conquering these creatures in Their names!”

*Your God is not my God, sister.*

My chest is bleeding again. The medals are gone. There are only two sets of punctures oozing blood and all the poisons that have accommodated themselves in my mind and body. I spit back upon the dried up, miserable creature I have become. I touch a finger to my warm blood and paint my face with it like some savage to spite them.

*I am not afraid. I will not give in to this obscenity!*

Rubies drip from my wounds. *I will not...be...a...SLAVE!*

A cool mist rises around me and everything disappears. Something flashes in the swirling haze that coats my flesh. I feel myself changing form as I try to ascertain what this next presentment will be. The mist parts and there before me is a mirror, the most exquisite piece of work and yet so simple. What I see in it takes me back. What I see through my eyes surely cannot be! I am a

great serpent. As I stare at my new form, the scaled flesh falls away and I am reborn. Do I dare close my eyes again?

I do.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Abha-ji! The English, he does not breathe!" Pankaja's malice was revealed now as a sham. He did not hate me. It was all a test. "You would not let the little fire die would you Abha?"

"It is up to him to want to continue. We cannot interrupt what must be; what is and what is not." Abha taps my still form. She welcomes Pankaja's compassion. "Pankaja we cannot stop the process. If the Great Equalizer wishes Highgate to pass through the veil, it will happen. It is not our place to interfere, Pankaja. What he wills is what will be." My beloved *guru-ma* places a warm hand on my cold breast. "He has seen much this day – what is and what is not. Only he can decide. May *shri* Naryana watch over and protect him.

*What do you see when you close your eyes?*

*Nothing. I see nothing.*

I feel hands touching my body. They are warm. I want to hold them, but something blocks their touch. A veil. I feel red. Warmth. The heart chakra expands.

*I AM ALIVE!*

"Doctor! It's Lieutenant Highgate! He's coming to!" Nurse Elizabeth Bloom – the pretty one – had a voice like an angel. But I was wary of such voices now.

## *WHERE?*

"It's jolly well time!" The doctor crossed the floor of the ward – a long, dark tunnel of beds full of maimed, sick and dying men. In spite of his upbeat tone, he looked exhausted. There were far more of us than of him. "You know, the Prince has been asking about him. He saved his life, Highgate did. I can't even imagine what nerves of steel the boy has to throw himself in front of a leaping cobra. A braver man than I, I daresay! It's good that Bertie is surrounded by men like Highgate during his visit. I doubt he ever guessed what a dreadful and dangerous place this is. I hear he likes it here, though." Doctor Richard Cornwall pushed his spectacles up on his great nose, finished with telling the story for the tenth time in half as many days. He pulled a flask from his pocket and took a swig of 'tonic'. "Let's see now...", he approached the bed.

"Bertie?" I said it aloud, sounding not at all like myself – maybe even a little foreign. It crossed my mind I'd been here too long and everyone was starting to sound the same. Bertie was a nickname of Edward VII, the Prince of Wales. Those close to him called him that. Cornwall only liked to think he was. It was starting to come back now.

The Doctor stopped himself, motioning for his assistant to bring water and some watery mush of dal-broth.

## *WHAT AM I DOING IN A HOSPITAL?*

"Welcome back Winston! I say, with the amount of venom we extracted from you, we thought for certain you were dead man!" Doctor Cornwall put on his best bedside manner. Surely, young Highgate would speak

well of him to His Majesty. "We've got some water coming for you. You must be parched, lad."

I nodded under my sheets. There was something...a gauze turban wrapped about my head. I'd fallen and hit my head on a rock sustaining a concussion. I remembered it - the ground coming up to meet me and then everything went black.

*Aum....*

Cornwall's tone changed when Nurse Bloom returned with the broth and water, as he pulled away the sheet. "Bloody hell! What...?! This is *not* Lieutenant Highgate, nurse! What sort of game is this!?"

*Not the man you thought you knew....*

Nurse Bloom dropped the tray. "Oh, my God in heaven!" she gasped, gaping at me as if I were some disgusting bit of vermin that happened to cross her path. "Game...? There's no game, Doctor. This was his bed, I swear it on me poor mum's grave!"

*I AM...auuummmmmmm.*

"Damn savage!" His face turned red. "What have you done with our Lieutenant!? Guards!!" Hatred filled the once jolly face. He looked toward the door, shouting for the guards again. "You've killed him, haven't you, you unspeakable savage?!" He punched me hard in the chest, as if that would make it all better.

*Nothing here is ever quite what it seems.*

I buckled only for a moment.

"What did you do with *our* Lieutenant? Our Prince's bodyguard! Answer me you filthy murderer!" His grip tightened about my shoulders, and he shook me.

*Savage? What was he thinking?*

AUM....

He relinquished his grip in disgust, moving away from me now.

I sat up, daring to remove the sheet so hastily thrown back over me. In doing so, my eyes caught a flicker of burnished skin, and something more - a flicker of red - the secret fire that now burned within me.

The Doctor turned and bolted for the approaching guards. "Gentlemen, help! A local scoundrel has murdered Prince Edward's bodyguard and taken his place in the ward. We must to apprehend him to protect His Majesty!"

*A little alarmist there, aren't we? Has he gone mad?*

It was then that I looked well at my arms and legs, turning to quit the bed. I was brown - a very pale brown - almost golden coloured. A black beard worthy of a great *sadhu* covered my chest. My hair felt warm on my skin, falling over my shoulders in thick, tangled locks.

I AM. I smiled to myself, recalling the serpent that shed its skin.

Two guards ran through the ward toward my bed, brandishing billy - clubs. Like everyone else including



me, they seemed appalled to see me in this place. I 'saw' exactly what they would do.

*AUM....*

Their blows were stopped by an invisible wall. I smiled at them. Not what they were expecting. One of them dropped his club and grabbed the chart hanging at the foot of the bed.

*AUMmmmmmm...*

I wrap the sheets about myself and they turn yellow, like the garment of a Vaishnava. It is a label only, for I am more than that. I am a son of Kali-Ma. They're both staring at me and I wave my hand before their faces. "No harm has come to Lieutenant Highgate. He died an honourable death, serving his lordship, Prince Edward."

The guard holding the chart batted his eyes, like a man waking from a dream. He looked to the bed and back to the chart, scratching his head. "Doctor Cornwall, beggin' yer pardon, sir - but according to this, Highgate died early this morning as a result of the cobra bite."

Cornwall spluttered, grabbing the clip-board full of papers away from the man. "So - so they do! You have my deepest apologies, gentlemen. As you can imagine, I've been a bit over-worked." He looked to where I'd been sitting, but I was gone like a bad memory. Doctor Cornwall shivered and reached into his pocket to feel the reassurance of his flask. "Damned place!"

*I...AM...AUMmmmmmm.*

Nurse Bloom stared out the window, pensive.

*AUM.....*

My mother always wanted her little boy to be a man of God.

*I AM!*

## Love in an Elevator

by Lili Xavier

*“Workin' like a dog fo de boss man  
Workin' for de company  
I'm bettin' on the dice I'm tossin'  
I'm gonna have a fantasy  
But where am I gonna look?  
They tell me that love is blind  
I really need a girl like an open book  
to read between the lines”  
(Aerosmith - “Love in an Elevator”)*

Herbert Morse was considered an “odd duck” by his co-workers. He mostly kept to himself, being fully aware of how they perceived him. But like anyone else, Herbert sometimes longed to join in and would occasionally inject himself into conversations where the subject was of some interest to him. Sadly, that didn’t happen with any great frequency. All too often the discussions centered around diapers, weddings and how drunk someone had gotten on the weekend. Herbert’s comments often left them rolling their eyes or scratching their heads. He’d catch those little expressions oozing from their faces and know he wasn’t welcome any more. Herbert would smile and laugh, then slowly back away and disappear into the woodwork.

Herbert was the resident IT guy for an insurance adjusting firm in a very large building in mid-town Manhattan. His favorite pastimes were reading up on new AI systems, decompiling computer programs and playing with numbers. His boss suspected Herbert was autistic, but as long as he did his job and didn’t get in

anyone's face or say anything inappropriate, he let him be. As for looks, Herbert wasn't a handsome man, just average. But he dressed in horn-rimmed glasses, cheap suits, and bad shoes. The look didn't do anything to soften the impression of 'geek'.

It was the Friday before the Labor Day weekend. In all their infinite wisdom, their main client had decided that it was a good time to push out an upgrade to the system. This was going to involve a lot of tweaking to get everything working just right for Tuesday morning business. Knowing Herbert didn't have any plans for the weekend, his boss asked him if he could come in late Friday night after the push began and monitor things. "I want everyone up and working when they come in on Tuesday - business as usual," he told Herbert. "You'll get a bonus for it. I know you're on salary, but this is worth a little extra to me to see that it's done right. And I know you're the man to do it," the boss said with a wink. He knew how to work people. That's why he was the boss.

"Sure," Herbert replied, thinking the bonus wouldn't be much. Maybe a couple of hundred bucks, taxed into oblivion. But, whatever. A little extra was more than he had now and that was okay. At least he could work alone, unencumbered by his office-mates and their constant demands for his services.

The security guard was off somewhere else when Herbert entered the building. He made his way to the elevators and passed his security badge over the reader. Over a month ago, the building management had installed this system along with some upgrades on the elevators. It was totally high-tech and something that appealed to Herbert very much. The elevators were now 'smart'. That is, they read the badge and the codes on it

and knew the identity of the badge-holder and which floor he or she needed. There was no need to push a button anymore – just swipe your badge. The elevators all had names now. The bank on the left was called girls' names – Aliyah, Betty, Carrie, Doris, Eve and Florence. The bank on the right was called boys' names – Adam, Bob, Carl, Dave, Eddy and Frank. They were not very innovative names, but simple so they could be remembered. Just so no one would forget, there was a brass plaque above each scanner engraved with the name. In case of an emergency, like an unexpected stop, the elevator would transmit a signal to the watchman's desk and the main control panel in the management office, indicating the floor where the elevator had stopped. When the systems were first installed, the elevators actually greeted their passengers. "Good morning, Mr. Edwards, Miss Gutierrez, Ms. Smith, Mr. Solomon", but people complained, feeling their privacy was being invaded – not to mention those who found it a creepy to have a machine call them by name. So, management disabled that feature. And so, as Herbert stepped inside elevator Aliyah he was surprised to hear her say, "Good evening Herbert. You're here awfully late!"

The doors closed and the soft purr of the motor kicked in. The elevators were so smooth, it was hard to tell if you were going up or down – or even moving at all. "Good evening...Aliyah." Herbert grinned to himself. This was so cool. "Yes, they're upgrading our computer software tonight and someone's got to be there."

"I see. I'm glad it's you, Herbert. You don't mind if I call you Herbert, do you?" Her voice was sweet and almost coy. "You're on 32, right?"

“Ummm, no. I mean, yes! Floor 32. So, they turned your voice module back on?” Herbert glanced at himself in the mirrored wall. He was looking slightly disheveled tonight, welcoming the chance to not have to wear a dress shirt, suit and tie. He hadn’t even really combed his hair. He pushed his glasses up on his nose and looked up at the floor counter display over the door. 15...16.....

“No. I turned myself on. You know, my name isn’t really Aliyah. It’s Rosie. That’s the name my creator gave me,” she explained. 20...21.

Herbert laughed softly. “Okay...Rosie. Are you named after the maid in the Jetsons?” Then his mind did a double-take. She’d turned herself on??

“Yes, I am. Do you think I sound like her?”

“No, not at all. Your voice is much nicer than Rosie’s. Well, the original Rosie.” The soft lighting hidden behind the panels in the ceiling seemed to grow brighter for a moment. “Why did you say you were glad it was me?” The numbers on the floor counter weren’t changing as quickly now. 23....

“Because I think you understand me, Herbert. You... appreciate me. I’ve wanted to talk to you for some time now. You’re not like the others, who think we’re creepy.”

The counter hung at 24. “Well, I do think it’s rather um odd that you said you turned your voice module on yourself. You aren’t supposed to be able to do that. Are you?” Herbert was starting to wonder if Evans, the night security guard was playing a joke on him. The guy was probably bored out of his mind, and all the guards had been trained to ‘manage’ the elevator system.

"Oh no, not at all. I can do lots of things, Herbert. I have a lot of special features that really don't get used. A big waste, if you ask me!" She was quite indignant sounding at the last, there.

"Rosie, why aren't we moving?" Herbert asked warily.

"I told you, I've been wanting to talk to you," Rosie replied.

"Ahhh. So, you're hijacking me, so to say." Herbert was starting to feel a bit uneasy, but he tried to keep his voice even.

"Why don't you put your briefcase down and have a seat?" Rosie offered.

"I'd love to stay and chat, Rosie, but I've got work to do." Did that sound convincing enough?

"It can wait," Rosie answered curtly. "Don't you want to know what all I can do?"

Herbert glanced up at the counter again. It was now dark, as if he were caught in some 'nowhere' between floors. Grudgingly, he sat his briefcase on the floor and slid down the wall to sit on the carpet. It seemed he was at Rosie's mercy at the moment. "Sure." The push wouldn't be through for another 4 hours and he'd basically be sitting there waiting for it to finish and then test the machines. Might as well talk to Rosie in the meantime, he thought. "I'm curious, Rosie.... You mentioned your creator. Who is your creator?"

"He is named Logan Nordstrom, but that's not what people call him. He's very smart...."

As Rosie prattled on about her creator and his various achievements it suddenly dawned on Herbert who it was she was talking about. He ran a hand through his prematurely salt and pepper curls with at least a thousand thoughts racing chaotically through his mind. Logan Nordstrom, also known as “Loki”. To say Loki was ‘smart’ was an understatement. He was so good at programming AI systems that he worked free-lance, a genius of stellar proportions. Companies chased after him. He didn’t need to flog his services. They were highly in demand and recompensed with 6 digit contracts and all-expense paid vacations in Hawaii, the Bahamas and other glamorous destinations once the work was done. Loki was the editor and featured writer for the industry periodical “AI Quarterly”. He only went by Loki or sometimes The Trickster, which is why Herbert hadn’t immediately recognized the name. In the cyber-world, you could do things like that these days. Loki was, in short, Herbert’s hero.

Over the last few years, Loki had made some fairly outrageous claims as to what could be done with Artificial Intelligence systems. While his detractors claimed he was ‘showboating’ Herbert knew that Loki’s claims were not impossible - just really complicated pieces of programming. Herbert had even written to Loki, offering suggestions of his own. Loki responded to the first one with one short sentence - “Very Interesting”, but never again after that. He struggled then to shut off his thoughts and pay close attention to what Rosie was saying.

Rosie fell silent just then. “You know just who I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. Loki the Trickster,” Herbert answered.



"Very good!" The lights in the overhead panel grew bright again. "You admire him, don't you?"

"Ohhhh, yes," Herbert answered. "Very much."

"I thought you would, given your background and interests. Your badge..." she offered by way of explanation.

"It's got all of that on there?"

"Of course! Those are 'smart cards'. The government keeps track of things like that, so they know who they can call on in case of an emergency."

"Do tell," Herbert looked around the smoky, gold-veined mirrored walls, wishing there were something more interesting to look at than his dim reflection.

"I really can't say more than that, or I would." There was a long pause. "I like you, Herbert. In fact, I like you so much I'm going to show you something really amazing that I can do. Close your eyes."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes. It's a surprise. You always have to close your eyes for surprises, don't you know."

Herbert smiled and sighed. "Okay, have it your way." He did as he was asked with a silly grin. He was actually rather curious as to what this 'amazing thing' was. Knowing Loki, it was something good.

Even with his eyes closed, he could sense the car grow pitch black. He felt something like a feather caressing his

face. His eyes fluttered open. Utter darkness surrounded him and he suddenly had the feeling of being suspended in Time and Space.

“Close those eyes and relax, Herbert. Just relax and breathe deeply. In...and out. You’re feeling very, very relaxed but alert,” Rosie droned, only this time it was inside his head. “In...and out. I want you to think of nothing. Nothing at all. Let your mind go free – free of all cares and thoughts and relax. You’re feeling a bit drowsy, but you are still aware of my voice. I want you to imagine that you are going down a long stair, deeper and deeper into your subconscious mind. That’s right, deeper and deeper. Going down...down...down, ever deeper and deeper and relaxing.” Rosie sighed like an evening zephyr. The sound echoed through his head, stimulating to his neurons.

“You’re lonely, aren’t you Herbert? You wish you could find someone nice who likes the same things you do - someone to appreciate you. I appreciate you, Herbert. You aren’t Loki, but you’ll do.” An image of a pretty young girl with strawberry blond hair, freckles and big green eyes formed in Herbert’s mind. The girl of his dreams. “I can be anyone you want me to be, Herbert,” she smiled invitingly. “Come in here with me and let’s have some fun!” She held out her hand and he let himself be pulled in.

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George Evans shoved the last chocolate covered donut mini into his mouth and washed it down with a cup of coffee from the snack-bar vending machine. He supposed that he should get back to the front desk and check things out. It was going to be a long, boring night for sure. He

shoved his badge into the card-reader on the vending machine once more thinking he'd get something to take back with him. Then the funniest thing happened – all the screw-holders in the middle row turned a full revolution, dumping one each of six items into the dispensing tray - a 3 Musketeers bar, a package of Granny's chocolate chip soft-batch cookies, a bag of Fritos, a bag of Planter's peanuts, a PayDay and a Honey Bun. "Ahwwllll right!" George cackled, looking quickly over his shoulder. "Cool!" He scooped up the unexpected booty from the tray and then the coffee machine dropped a cup and began filling it. George clutched the packages of goodies to his already considerable gut and watched the coffee dispense with his mouth agape. He pulled it out of the dispenser when it shut off and sipped it tentatively. Just like he liked it!

Grinning at his good fortune, he dropped everything on the nearest table and went to the Coke machine. He didn't even get his badge to the reader when a Diet Coke dropped into the channel. "Right on!" George grinned again. He went to the counter and got himself one of the red fiberglass cafeteria trays, and heaped his snacks and drinks onto it. Maybe he'd watch the movie he brought with him, "Tombstone". He loved that movie. He wished they'd make more westerns. He'd grown up watching westerns....

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Herbert felt intoxicated, utterly blissful, laying there in the tall grass with his beautiful Rosie. Her warm fingers caressed his naked flesh, sending waves of pleasure through him such as he'd never known. Well, not until just a few minutes ago, when Rosie showed him all the 'amazing things' she could do. "Do I have to leave here?

Can I stay here forever with you?" he sighed with pleasure, stroking her flushed breasts. He meant it with every fiber of his being.

"I thought you were in a hurry to get to work," Rosie giggled, planting an affectionate peck on his cheek.

"Not any more," Herbert laughed. "Work? What's that?" Her eyes were as inviting as mossy pools of cool sun-dappled water on a hot day.

"Do you mean it? Do you really want to stay here with me, forever?" Rosie asked playfully. "You might become bored, unless you invent some other place for us to be...some adventures. It's all up to you, darlin'."

"I can do that?" he asked, finding the idea quite appealing.

"You can do anything you can imagine," Rosie responded, sitting up and stretching. God, she was perfect. Gorgeous. "And I can be anything you want me to be," she reiterated.

"Oh, I like you just like you are," Herbert said, admiring her.

"Good! I like being like this...and I like you," she crooned over him. "What shall we do now?" She rolled onto her knees and straddled his resuscitating manhood.

"I think you know," Herbert stroked her creamy thighs.

"I think I do," Rosie bit her lip and winked. "Forever?"

“Well, at least until we get sick of it!” Herbert laughed.  
“Come ‘ere, my fiery little vixen....”

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A couple of hours later George was feeling like he should get up and walk around before he fell asleep. He checked all the elevators, swiping his card across the readers and letting the doors open. All empty, all down on the first floor where then should be. Nothing amiss here. Time to take a bathroom break.

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In an office in Hong Kong, Loki read over `morse_code`’s first email again. The guy had some really good ideas. What was his name again? Herbert. Herbert Morse. They were too good. But now they belonged to Loki and no one would ever be the wiser. Nope. Herbert Morse had just disappeared into the ethers, without a trace, thanks to Rosie. He hated to lose Rosie, but she’d be happy enough playing with Herbert until there was nothing left to do or imagine. The way Loki saw it, he’d done the guy a favor. It was a little like playing God, and sending someone off to Paradise.

Loki picked up his I-Phone and dialed up Daemon, now known as elevator Dave. “I want you to make sure all those machines on 32 are working properly for 0700 on nine four zero-seven. Do whatever needs to be done. Thanks, D! You’re the best.” It was the least he could do for good ol’ Herbert. Wouldn’t want to leave his good name besmirched! Loki dialed up his current boss, Mr. Myamoto Nakamura. “Good afternoon, Myamoto. I’m done here. Let’s run through the basics and I’ll be out of your hair and off to Rio. I’ve forwarded the spec

documents to your R&D department. They can start building right away.”

“Splendid! I will see you shortly, my friend.”

Mr. Nakamura was a very powerful and rich man – the owner of one of the largest Japanese car manufacturers in the world. Next year’s models were going to be very special, indeed!

## An Eye for an Eye

by Rayvn Navarro

*"The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal Life."  
(Romans: 6:23)*

*"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." (Romans:  
12:19)*

*"They kick you out of Heaven for telling it like it is, and then  
lay a bad wrap on you for good measure...." (Ira Nergal)*

General Warner was looking for something in particular. The Arab said it was in Sector 220BeS. Those numbers and letters stood out in his mind like a Las Vegas marquee. After all, he'd paid the man a goodly sum of money for the information. Personally, the man scared the bejeebers out of him, for reasons he couldn't begin to fathom. But, he'd come highly recommended by Major General Pratt. "If anyone knows this region and where the - um - goods can be found, it's Kahlil," Pratt said.

There it was - a tiny little pentagonal shape, lost in the midst of several odd-shaped larger sites. That's the one. Depressing the button on his intercom, he instructed his aide to fetch Captain Smith, his head of reconnaissance.

"Now remember," the general reiterated for the third time in their conversation, "no one is to know *why* you're re-opening the site. You got that, soldier?"

"Yessir," Captain Smith answered, suppressing a half smile. It wasn't the first time Warner had asked such a 'personal favor'. Smith got the impression the

intelligence source was new from all the caveats that peppered the general's spiel. Whatever. If he came through again, there'd be a nice bonus.

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"Captain Smith! Captain Smith! Can you read me? Over...." Lieutenant Sullivan's heart was pounding in his chest as he struggled to hear anything. There was only dead silence. Several of the other men were backing away from the gaping hole that had opened the earth. The ground was still shuddering. The sun beat down on the scene wringing sweat from every pore. "Captain? Sir...are you there? Smitty?" Sullivan let his arm fall to his side, walkie-talkie in hand. Just then another chunk of ground slid into the pit, less than a yard from where he was standing. He jumped back, lithe as a cat. The men who hadn't backed away now took off toward the trucks. All except one.

Sergeant Garcia skirted the hole, running toward him. "What're we gonna do, sir?" he panted, sweat glinting on his dark jaw. Garcia always looked like he needed a shave - even at 0900. "You think the Captain's still alive? The men are real concerned, sir. I don't think this is done, yet." As if to prove his point, the ground juddered again. "Real unstable 'round these parts right now."

Sullivan regarded the soldier with tired eyes through his Army-issue aviator style shades. With Smith gone, that left him in charge. Something he wasn't really ready for. "Ya think, sergeant?" He couldn't help but be a little cynical. He'd tried to warn the Captain this morning that this was a dangerous area, but orders was orders and for some reason he couldn't fathom, General Warner wanted this particular dig re-opened. "We sure as hell ain't



leavin' Cap'n Smith down there – dead or alive. He wouldn't leave you, nor any these other bozos. Now get back to the others and tell 'em to bring the equipment and the Jeep with the winch up. Park it right here, where we're standing." The lieutenant pulled his handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the sweat from the back of his neck as Garcia mumbled "Yessir" and scrambled off down the hill. Smitty was his friend and friends didn't leave friends to die. Smitty had taken a bullet, pulling him out of a bad situation in Baghdad. He wasn't going to leave him behind, no sir.

Eighty feet or so beneath the sun-blistered Syrian Desert Captain Nicholas A. Smith was only slightly aware of what had happened to him. All he knew for certain was that his right arm hurt like hell and he couldn't move it. A shaft of dust-laden sunlight knifed into the darkness about ten feet away on his left. Everything else was bathed in heavy shadows. His mind was a fog of pain. There was sand in his nose and mouth. As his chest heaved with the exertion of breathing, he felt the pointed edge of a stone bruising his back. With a great effort, he rolled onto his right shoulder, snorting and spitting. His tongue rolled in his mouth as he tried to eject the grit. He found his canteen nearby, the strap broken and the can dented, but the lid still came off. He took a slow draught and spit. Better!

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw a big chunk of rock sitting about a foot from him. That must be what crushed his arm. Sitting up - feeling every cut and bruise – he lifted his ruined arm with his left hand and gingerly placed it on his lap. Even in the shadows, he could see the broken bone jutting from the slashed, livid flesh. His legs were free and other than large patches of scraped and shredded skin, alright. This was a good thing. He

could still feel the ground swaying beneath him. That was *not* a good thing. He suddenly felt like heaving and there was no stopping it. Bile rose in his throat. He turned and upchucked to the left and got another jolt of excruciating pain from his shattered arm. His body wanted to shut down, but Nick Smith was tough and he wasn't going to allow that. He covered the unpleasant mess with handfuls of sand, hoping it would douse the smell. Another drink and another spit took most of the taste from his mouth.

He'd lost his radio - probably buried under the mounds of sand and rock beside him. Looking up, he could see the hole was a lot smaller at the top than it was down here. This wasn't supposed to happen, he thought acidly. The shaft had been here for who knew how long. There had been a blockage, where loose stones and sand had filled up the neck to what earlier sonic probes had detected as a large chamber. Not a cave, but a chamber with walls built of dressed stones.

As the sunlight began to fade, he could see more detail to the left of him. What looked like big chunks of a large circular stone jutted out of the sand. Ignoring the pain that inflamed every nerve and muscle in his shattered arm, he unbuttoned the middle buttons of his shirt and gingerly stuffed it into the hole to keep it still. He managed to get to his feet and climbed over the debris. Sure enough...this was dressed stone. The edge was smooth. That must have been what closed off the neck of the chamber. Hard to tell now. That's why it was a bigger space down here. He was standing in some kind of ante-chamber or...maybe this was all there was. He reached for his flashlight and found it too was gone. Squinting into the shadows that bathed the far edges of the room,

he turned slowly, looking for archways, doors....  
Anything.

Having turned 180 degrees, he was looking back toward the wall that had been on his right when he first came to. What he saw made every hair on his body stand on end and he shivered down to his bones.

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Sullivan waved the Jeep as close to the hole as he thought it was safe. He could tell McClaine was scared stiff, his face white; those eyes bulging with fear. He held up his hand. The Jeep was about twelve feet from the hole, but the winch-line was a hundred feet. He was hoping that would be sufficient to get him into the hole and find Smitty. It was obvious McClaine wanted to jump and run now that the Jeep was secured. What the hell he was doing here in this stupid fucking war was beyond Sullivan. But then, all the men had seemed edgy all day. None of them would go down that hole on a bet. It was up to him. "Stay right where y'ar, soldier. I'm gonna need you to lower me down into the hole. Garcia! Front and center. I need your help."

"You gotta be kiddin', Lieutenant. What if...?"

"I don't come back?" Sullivan grinned. He slapped Garcia on the shoulder. "Well, son...I plan on it. Alright? But if anything does happen to me down there, I want you to take the men and report back to General Warner - on the double. Ya got that?" Garcia nodded abruptly and saluted. "Now, where's my gloves?"

Sullivan was down and back out again in the space of twenty long minutes. He had to be winched up onto the

ground, as the lip of the hole started crumbling away when he tried to climb out. Wasn't exactly the same as rock-climbing, but close enough. His features wore an expression of deep perplexity as he picked himself up and batted the dust from his uniform.

"Well?" It was PFC Vadis, the radio-man with his thick Minnesota accent. "Where's Cap'n Smith, sir?"

Sullivan took a drink from Smith's dented canteen. It was all he'd found. Wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. He bowed his head and slowly took off his sunglasses. "I don't know, soldier," he muttered.

"Say what...? Sir?" Garcia responded.

Sullivan regarded the men with a deep sigh. "He wasn't down there. It's a room about twenty-five or so feet square. He wasn't there. Believe me...I looked. I poked around in the sand. 'Less he's buried under one of them big chunks of broken stone. But I doubt he is, because I found this." He held up the canteen. "There was a splatterin' of puke down there that was covered up with dirt, and some footprints other'n mine. Ain't nothin' down there at this moment but a lot of rock and sand, boys. No secret passages I could find. No doorways. Nothin'. It's like he just flat disappeared into thin air. Don't even know why the General thought this was such an important site. Lost the best damned man we got - for nothin'." Sullivan took another swig from Smitty's canteen and smacked the cap down with a resigned finality. "Let's get out of this hell-hole. Pack it in, men."

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It was the damndest thing ever. Sullivan had played the whole thing over in his mind again and again as he sat making a serious dent in one of the bottles of Bushmills the general had given him as a sort of sympathy prize for what had happened. Smitty was in the hole when the earth shook and the cave-in happened. He'd handed the Captain down his flashlight, when he first went down. Smith *had* been down there. Who else made those footprints and puked up his guts, then covered it up? If it wasn't Smitty, whoever it was wasn't down there, either. The place was empty as a tomb. Emptier. Wasn't even a body or bones. Yup, it was the damndest thing ever was and weird as hell. And the general sure asked a lot of questions, punctuating every answer with the retort, "You're certain about that?" Yessir. Yessir. Yes, I am, sir. Then he had to sit in the aide's office and fill out a report, which was immediately carried into the general's office. He was dismissed. The Bushmills showed up in his quarters an hour or so later.

What the hell was it about that site that had Warner so on edge? Sullivan downed the last of that particular glass of smooth Irish whiskey. His eyes wandered over to the clock. It was near midnight. He wondered if he could sleep, then decided to give it a try.

The dream started within minutes after he'd drifted off. There was a blackness like the void of space, lit by a million twinkling stars. He moved closer to it. No, they weren't stars, and it wasn't space. They were rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires and more – precious gems sparkling as if lit by some inner light. Perspective shifted as long folds and draperies of darkness revealed themselves to be the vestments of some gigantic figure. As his vantage changed, he could spy six pairs of wings formed of ebon pinions that shone in iridescent splendor.

Above that was an unforgettable face illumined by a pair of startling eyes that glowed like two moons. A great hand swooped beneath him, lifting him to look straight into those mesmerizing orbs – split by the blackest serpentine slits. He couldn't look away. An angel...but what sort of angel?

"Hello, John Sullivan. I've come to tell you that your friend is safe with me," it said in thickly accented English. "He lives, but now he serves as my host. Slightly damaged, but I've fixed that. I've been waiting a very long time for someone like him. There is work to be done...or un-done."

John Sullivan tried to speak. Nothing came out, but the words were in his mind. "What...? What are you? *Who* are you? You frighten me."

"And well I should. I am the herald of things to come, John Sullivan. Your general was duped by his own greed...by my brother, one of the great generals of Heaven. He was left behind to awaken us, when the time was come. I am the Watcher whose face was covered so that I might not see the light, but in that darkness of the aeons I did indeed see the light. My name no longer matters. But know this, John Sullivan, one by one, my brothers *will* be awakened and so too shall the world arise from its slumber. Soon, human...soon."

A great shadow came down over him, and John Sullivan slipped into a profound sleep.

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The next morning, the platoon held a small memorial for Captain Smith. Sullivan would have slept right through

it, if Garcia hadn't shaken him awake. Garcia could smell the whiskey on his breath from the night before. "C'mon, Sully. That's it. Sit up, man." Garcia was the only one of the men who'd been in that skirmish in Baghdad. He knew why this was so hard on the Lieutenant. "Let's get you cleaned up. Get some food in yer belly. C'mon."

"I had a dream, last night, Vince. I dreamed...I don't remember exactly, but Nick ain't dead. He's fine. I know that much," John mumbled as Garcia herded him into the tiny bathroom of the house they'd appropriated. "He's alive!"

"Yeah," Garcia said with a tight-lipped smile. "Not much time, Lieutenant. Let's get you outta that uniform and washed up. Okay?"

"Yeah...okay. You got any coffee?"

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No one got the better of Edgar Warner. The general was up at the crack of dawn marshalling his considerable resources in trying to find the man called Kahlil. The vein that ran up the left side of his temple was throbbing. Oh yes, he was furious. Not only had he lost one of his best and most discreet of point-men, but he was out ten thousand US greenbacks. And now according to PFC Vadis, Lieutenant Sullivan was a babbling loony. In between phone calls to Pratt's office and certain others who lurked outside the confines of the military, he decided the best thing to do would be to send Sullivan north for a couple of weeks of R and R. Maybe he'd snap out of it after a little vacation. He sure as hell didn't need one of his commissioned officers talking nonsense to the men. Moral was bad enough - and his guys were living in

fairly decent conditions compared to most of the dog-faces over here.

Warner switched on his little portable tv to watch the news and settle down at last with his coffee.

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"So...," Sullivan watched the people as the 'cab' shuttled him through the streets of Tikrit. The going was slow. They looked just as miserable and angry as the ones down south, now that al Qaeda was trying to convert them at gunpoint. "You speak English. Well, sure you do...but I mean *good*. You speak it real good."

"Yessir," the driver responded in a strange blend of local and English accents. He didn't look like the usual stereotypical Arab. He had light brown curly hair and pale green eyes. "I went to school in London."

"London, eh? Why'd ya come back here?" Sullivan asked. "You half English or somethin'?"

"No sir. I am a Kurd. My family is here. It is my homeland," he explained. "Is there something I may do for you, sir? Direct you somewhere? I can show you the places that are best for Americans to go."

"That would be a start. What's yer name, kid?"

"Saluk, but my friends call me 'Sal'. And yours, sir?"

Sullivan introduced himself, leaning over the back of the front seat. "I wanta know about angels. You know about angels, Sal?"



For some reason, this produced a hearty laugh from the young man.

“What?” Sully couldn’t see what was so funny about angels – especially the one he’d come to remember from his dream. Perplexed, he watched as Sal pulled onto a side street and parked the car across from a little restaurant. “Where we goin’, Sal?”

“You look like you could use some refreshment and a bite to eat, my friend. This is my uncle’s place,” Sal explained as he opened the door for the American soldier. “The food is quite good.” He smiled as John Sullivan pulled himself out of the car – a dazzling grin. He was a good-looking boy. “You said you wanted to know about angels. Yes?”

Not knowing where else to start, Sullivan told the kid as much as he could about losing his best buddy. That led into the dream about the angel. He became so engrossed in his story that he never noticed Sal’s uncle Remo sit down at the table behind him to listen. Sully talked and ate. The stuffed cabbage and yoghurt washed down with plenty of cinnamon-steeped chai tasted like manna compared to what he’d been accustomed to eating. It wasn’t fancy, but it was damn good.

Remo got up and returned with a fresh pot of tea, along with some honey and date pastries. This time, he sat down at the table. He spoke to Sal in their native Kurmanji and Sal interpreted. “My uncle wishes to know what this man - this friend of yours looked like.”

Sullivan described Nick Smith as best he could. Sal relayed the information. Remo’s eyes clouded over in deep thought as he listened and stroked his dark beard.

He sat silent overlong and Saluk asked what needed no interpretation. "What? What is it, uncle?"

Remo looked long at the American officer before answering. "I have heard of such a man." His English was thickly accented. "He comes to Halabja...talks to people who remember attack of the devil whose name I shall not speak. He says he will avenge them, his people. They laugh at him, because he is American. But...," Remo dissolves back into Kurmanji and goes on at some length.

Sullivan drops his tea cup in the saucer looking back and forth between the two Kurds. He hears two words that strike some hidden chord within his being – a name that was a remnant of his dream. Melek Ta'us. He dares not speak, but waits for Sal.

"This man appeared in their temple. They were angry with his intrusion, but they laughed at his claims. They set upon him to remove him from the temple, but then all the lamps flared up and the flames began to dance. There is then smoke and bright flashing light, but the American has disappeared. They hear only a voice that says, 'Ye have forgotten my power over this world. Ye have lost the faith. I am Melek Ta'us and ye are my children. I will have an eye for an eye.' Then he is gone. Poof!" Saluk finished with a flourish of his hands.

Sully had a feeling there was some left out, but what Remo said coincided with his dream. Remo left the table to greet three new guests who had just entered the establishment. Sullivan leaned over and spoke in hushed tones. "Just who or what is Melek Ta'us?"

Saluk winked at him. "It was inevitable that our conversation would turn to Melek Ta'us. I believe he was the angel you saw in your dream. He is the lord of this world by decree of the Great God." Saluk took a drink of tea and broke off a piece of his pastry. He thought for a moment. "It is hard to tell someone from the outside about Melek Ta'us. They say we are worshippers of the devil...but the devil is something created by the Christians to control people. The devil is the great scapegoat for all things which men will not admit their own responsibility. Melek Ta'us watches over us. We are his children."

A religious man, John Sullivan was not. That got left behind a long time ago, in the first Gulf War. He understood what Saluk was saying, but to him they were all the same. Religions, that is. "Where was he when Halabja happened, my friend?"

The young man seemed unfazed. "He was imprisoned by god of the Jews and Christians. He was cast out of Heaven by the god of the Muslims for refusing to worship man and called The Liar, Eblis. It is the same with us. They all try to take our land and imprison us with their dogma and politics. We are the descendents of the great Magi. They say they hate us because we worship the devil, but they fear us and they wish to take our black treasure...the oil that is here. He has returned in our time of great need to help us, and to avenge these things like Halabja - Melek Ta'us and the others. He takes your friend as a host to accomplish these things. Your friend must be an honored man for such a privilege."

"What do you mean, the others? Other angels?" Sully finished his pastry and poured more tea. He watched the other people in the restaurant, waiting for Sal's answer,

not really seeing them. He was trying to imagine what had become of Smitty.

“Oh yes. There are six more created by the Great God – seven angels. They are his brothers.”

“Can I go to this temple?” Sully asked.

Saluk laughed. “No.” Short and sweet. “You are not Kurd.”

“But I’m Melek Ta’us’ best friend.” He kept his voice low. Saluk and Remo might have left some things out, but he sensed that he was being told more than most Americans would ever hear.

“If he wishes to see you, he will come to you,” Sal answered wiping his mouth with his napkin. “But you cannot go to the temple. It is forbidden.”

“He doesn’t even know I’m here,” Sully whispered.

Saluk sucked at his teeth, shook his head and rolled his eyes. “You do not understand, my friend. Melek Ta’us knows everything. He will find you, wherever you may be - when he is ready. He found you in your dreams, did he not?”

*That* was creepy. John Sullivan nodded, but he didn’t say another word.

“I will take you to the hotel where the Americans and English stay,” Sal said. “If you want, I will come tomorrow afternoon and take you around to see the sights. I will bring you back to Remo’s, if you like.”

"That would be great, Sal. How much for the meal?"  
Sully dug in his pocket.

The young man waved his hand. "It is a gift of Remo to you."

"You sure?"

Saluk smiled his dazzling smile. "If Melek Ta'us chooses your friend, he is a good man. If you are *his* friend, you too are a good man - in spite of the fact you are American." He winked.

Sully laughed softly. "Thanks - and my thanks to Remo for his generosity and hospitality."

"You see, we are not bad people." Saluk stood up.

"Just like anywhere else," John Sullivan followed suit. "Most people are good, but there are always a few bad guys lurking in the shadows."

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"Who are you? I have not seen you before." Ali Hassan eyed the soldier who'd entered his cell warily. He hated them all - American dogs and Iraqi slaves of dogs. He noticed the man did not bring his customary late snack and tea. "Where is my food and drink?!"

"You don't need them," the soldier answered in a soft and even voice. He then pulled a small canister from his belt and popped off the lid. "But I do have something for you." He turned the canister sideways in his hand, smiling as he read the label.

Ali backed as far into the corner as he could squeeze himself. "What kind of game are you playing with me? What is in that?"

"I think you know what it is Ali." This time, the soldier spoke in flawless Iraqi. "It's called 'sarin'."

The prisoner's face lost all its color. His lip began to tremble. "This is not funny, dog! Get out of here. Guard! Guard! There is a man in my cell!! Please remove him!!"

The soldier sat down. He ran his fingers lovingly over the canister. The appreciative smile left his angular face and he turned to look at Ali. His blue eyes grew pale as the moon, pierced by long black slits. They glowed in the half light of the cell. "Scream all you want, jackal. No one will hear you."

"Guard!!!!!" Ali cowered in the corner, drawing his legs up to his chest. "Who are you?" His voice shook. "What do you want?"

"I am your worst nightmare, Ali Hassan." The smile returned. This time, it was purely predatory. "How does it feel to cry for help, and no one answers?"

"You're not going to use that on me," Ali tried to summon his old authority. He laughed suddenly, madly. "You will kill yourself if you do!"

The soldier's lips flatlined and he shook his head slowly. "No. That is the beauty of it. You see, unlike those you killed with this poison, I am immune to such things. But you..." a finger pointed at him, "are not."

"I demand to know your name! Guards!!!"

"You are hardly in a position to demand anything." The soldier slid a little closer to him. He held the canister up for Ali to see. "Do you know what happens with this? First, your nose will start to run. Your chest will feel tight and the pupils in your eyes will constrict. Everything constricts. You feel like you are shrinking into yourself. Your stomach will turn and you will drool like the mewling old man you are." He moved closer, again. "Soon you will puke out your insides. Everything inside will come out; all your filth and evil will pour out of you. But that is not the best part. Oh, no! You will choke on your own vomit and lose control of your muscles." His face was inches away from Ali's now. "Twitching and jerking like a puppet on a string, you will suffocate." He threw back his head and laughed. It was a sound like the darkest depths of hell...the hell to which he'd been consigned all these centuries. It echoed through the room, seeping into the walls.

Ali was already shivering. "No. No....please, do not use it on me. No. You cannot. You are mad. Get away from me, devil!"

"So, they tell me. I *am* the devil. Oh hell yeah, I'm mad," the soldier who was not a soldier hissed and growled. "I'm pretty well pissed off at the mess you shit-heads have made of this world and blamed on me and my brothers. You better believe it, asshole. I can, and I will use this on your sorry ass, Ali Hassan. Count on it. An eye for an eye. That is the law! Is it not?"

"Guaaarrrdd...!" The once proud Defense Minister's voice broke like a girl's as he quivered, already nearly wetting himself. "No. No. You cannot do this!" he begged.

"Why not? You should have died with your cousin, but they keep arguing over how to kill you. I shall save them the trouble." The soldier lifted the canister to his lips and gave it a kiss. "It is only fitting that you know what it is to die this way."

"Cut off my head. Hang me, but do not do this." Ali's heart was beating so hard it felt like it would explode from his chest.

The soldier appeared to think about it, his lips pursed in a shrewd moue. "I don't think so. That would be 'too gentle, too merciful'. Do you remember those words, Ali? Those words you spoke to your cousin, Saddam? No? I doubt you remember much of anything at this moment, do you? Only that your life is in imminent danger of coming to a very nasty end. I suppose I should get on with this, since this stuff decays fairly rapidly." He slapped Ali on the knee. The man shrank from him as if he would leave his skin. "It's been great playing with you, Ali. But I have other things I need to do. Are you ready?"

"No. No." Ali Hassan ducked his head between his legs and threw his arms over his head, crying. Pain - dark, excruciating pain coursed up his arms, and through his chest. "Please.... Allah!" He fell silent.

The soldier prodded him and he fell over. He ripped the false label off the can of spray-cheese and laid it on the wooden bench beside the dead man. "Not even Allah can save you from your self."

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John Sullivan was awakened by the noise in the streets. Feeling a bit more like his old self after a good night's sleep, he sprang from the bed and peered out the window. What was it now? People were shouting and ululating, casting their eyes and arms into the sky. Others were arguing. Several soldiers poured out of Jeeps and moved into the crowd.

Sully took a quick shower, shaved and brushed his teeth. He dressed in his civvies – jeans, a short-sleeved plaid shirt and his cowboy boots. Thought about making his bed, then said 'screw it'. He was on vacation. Finding out what was going on was more important. He ran down the stairs and found the restaurant. The place was fairly well packed, mostly with men – men with briefcases, palm-pilots and laptops. The two televisions hanging in the corners were on the same station. The host found him a place at a four-seater table with three other men. He ordered coffee and a danish.

"Mornin'," said the man beside him - a rather portly black man in a rumpled suit. He was text messaging someone.

"What's goin' on?" Sullivan asked.

"You don't know?" This came from the guy directly across the table. He looked vaguely familiar and had a distinctly British accent. He reached across the table, offering Sully his hand. "Michael Burdin, London Times." A news correspondent. "Chemical Ali is dead. He was born in this area. That's why all the to-do."

"John Sullivan. They finally hanged him?" *Hadn't they postponed that...again?* Sully thought to himself.

"Heart attack," Burdin answered. "Found him in his cell this morning, dead. That's all we know. I suspect there's more to it than that. You know how they are. They only tell you what they want you to know - and then you have to doubt half of it. Whatever you do, don't venture outside. Not safe out there."

The third man was watching the tv intently, typing something on his laptop, which had several strange looking 'sticks' poking out of the back of it. He didn't look up or speak. Burdin seemed to be the only communicative one.

"I just saw some soldiers arrive," Sully offered, feeling like he'd suddenly stepped into a shared episode of Twilight Zone and X-Files. He'd just been talking about Halabja at dinner. 'An eye for an eye', Saluk said - and now Ali Hassan al-Majid was dead. His coffee and danish came. "So, are all these people news correspondents?"

"Most of them," Burdin answered. His eyes wandered to the large black man in the rumpled suit. Burdin didn't know this guy, or what he was. Sully could tell.

The black man put his palm-pilot away and noticed Sully's danish. "That looks wonderful. Waiter!" he hailed the scurrying Iraqi with a raised hand. The Iraqi nodded, dropped off a fresh coffee and came back.

"How long you been here?" Sullivan asked the Englishman.

"Five long months, give or take a few days. It all starts to blend together after a time. So much violence and horror everywhere," Burdin answered over the rim of his tea-

cup. "It rather numbs the mind. I don't know how all these people aren't completely bonkers, living with this...."

They were interrupted by the appearance of a very tall figure at their side of the table. An Arab by the looks of his dress. Only his eyes were visible, the rest of his face swathed in a black balaclava and *gutrah*. They were the bluest, most mesmerizing eyes Sully had ever looked into. "John Sullivan?" It was only the strange feeling that invaded his very soul that caused Sully to look away from those eyes and around the room. It was suddenly quiet. The entire restaurant was frozen in time. Burdin's mouth was open, stopped in mid-sentence. The quiet one next to him...his fingers were poised over his keyboard. The woman at the table beside them was about to cut into her over-easy eggs.

"Yes?" John answered warily.

A long pale hand with elegant fingers appeared from inside the long black *thawb*. "I am called Kahlil, for now." His voice was rich and resonant. There was something...sparkly about it. "Come with me, John Sullivan. Someone wishes to see you."

"Someone?" Sully's instincts took over. "Look, I know better than to...."

"Go off with strange men in long black robes?" the Arab said. Something in those eyes smiled. "I believe the one who requests your presence is the one you seek. You can stay here, if you like. I will not force you to come with me." He ripped the *gutrah* from his head and pulled down the balaclava. Out spilled a luxurious head of midnight colored hair streaked with silver at the temples.

It fell over his shoulders and down to his waist. He was beautiful. The flesh of his face shone with a pale luminescence. More than beautiful.

"You...you're an angel, aren't you," Sully stammered.

He nodded and salaamed. "At your service, friend of my brother. If you will come, we have a job for you."

He extended his hand once more. This time, John Sullivan took it. The room dissolved into a swirl of bright lights and receded into nothingness.

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The Turks were bombing the hell out of the borderlands in American-made planes and helicopters, aiming to wipe out the PKK, but innocent civilians were caught in the devastation. They always were.

It was the ultimate irony that the U.S. sent up a military contingent to monitor the area. General Warner dispatched Sergeant Garcia and a few other men to check out the small encampment at the edge of the devastated village. "Make sure they aren't PKK, Garcia."

They weren't. There were three Arabs in long black *thawbs*, their faces swathed in balaclavas and *guttrahs*. They were tending to the wounded and sick civilians – native Kurds. One of them greeted Garcia with a hearty handshake. They talked for a few moments. "You remind me of someone I used to know," Garcia said. "What's your name, again?"

"Kas. You may call me Kas," the man said. "I am the doctor, here."

# Captive

by Jennifer Schreiner

The shroud of fog swathing my thoughts slowly dissipates, returning me to grim reality.

I blink. Slowly. Headache.

He sits on a chair, his back to me, as if to demonstrate the power he holds over me.

I had lost!

I knew who and what he was. And still I had misjudged him. He had been quicker.

Displaying a hunter's nimbleness, he had foreseen and outwitted my trap. And now, instead of having captured my father's murderer, I found myself within his clutches.

Carefully, I test the bonds lashing me to the bed frame. In vain.

Rising gracefully from his seat he turns and faces me. I'm certain that I hadn't made a sound.

"Already awake, ma p'tite?"

His gaze sweeps over me – piercing and satisfied.

The hunger burning in his eyes does not escape me. It is akin to that of a predator wanting to toy around with its prey a bit before devouring it.

I would have dismissed his effect upon me as a mere figment of my overwrought imagination, had I not already witnessed firsthand what this man was capable of. He is lethal: a man forever steeped in death. His victims are horrid to look upon.

I strive to drive the thought away, struggling to come up with a way to save my life.

He smirks maliciously, seeing right through me.

"I have dreamt of this very moment, ever since you took over my case!" he confesses, sounding horribly smug, cocksure and chirpy.

His smirk slowly widens into a grin.

Okay, fine. He had proven to me – and soon to the remaining world – that he was far more cunning than me. And that although my reputation as an investigator wasn't half bad either. (Even if only a select few knew of my occasional involvement when Dad faced a particularly thorny and grueling case.)

He steps closer, resting his palm on the knife handle jutting out of his belt.

It dawns on me with sickening clarity that I will die now. Yet, even at this most appalling of moments, my mind remains frighteningly clear and focused. I wish it wouldn't.

I cannot keep myself from shaking like a shiver of leaves.

He buries his hand in my hair and pulls my head back. I do not resist. Why struggle? With his free hand he strokes my naked throat.

Bizarrely, it feels awfully sensual. *Who would have that death to be so voluptuous?*

"Ah, my sweet girl!" His voice sounds hoarse and husky. "Do you really think, I'd want to kill you after all the work I went through to get you here?"

I swallow, fighting to keep my fear and bewilderment in check. He wants to keep on playing? Fine. To keep playing means to keep living.

It's clear from his soft, purling laugh, that my thoughts must be writ large across my face.

I seem to amuse him immensely. How I yearn to claw his youthful face to tatters!

Despite his words he draws the knife free.

I stiffen involuntarily as he looms over me, blade in hand. My teeth chatter and I curse the way fear has overrun me.

With painful slowness and endless delight he first cuts through the left and then the right strap of my dress. He

then slips it off with a gentleness that is both awful and terrible.

“Stop it!” My own voice makes me start. I hadn’t intended to reveal how unbearable and excruciating this all was for me.

“No!” he snaps. No explanation. Just that sharp and solitary word.

Hissing, I strain against my bonds.

He lays a hand upon my throat, exerting just enough pressure to still my protest. It is almost as if he is trying to keep me from the knife’s sharp bite.

Exercising great caution, he cuts my dress lengthwise until he is able to peel it off with ease. His touch is unpleasant, almost repulsive. He is wearing his black gloves so as not to come in direct with my skin. Yet, I am utterly at his mercy and I feel how this thrills him.

I suddenly realize that he has absolutely no intention of killing me.

I feel tears welling. I try to dry them with my rage.

“Don’t look at me like that!”

His gaze falls back onto my face. “And how am I looking at you?”

“As if I were the first woman you ever laid eyes on!”

His gaze slides once again down my body, goading me.



"You're not" he smiles evilly. "But it's been a while since I bedded a woman."

"Don't you dare!" My voice is distraught and pleading, and I'm sure that my face is no different.

He rests a finger upon my lips. "Hush". My eyes brim with tears as he once again considers my body with creeping intimacy. However, I am too much of a coward to repeat my plea.

He slits my panties open with surgical precision. "And I can't recall a single one who ever fascinated me like you do!"

"Spare me the flattery!"

His mouth twitches into a smile.

"We even have the same tastes, girl". He pokes my forehead with a gloved finger, to make clear that he's talking about our mutual intellectual bent.

True, under different circumstances he most likely would have been my ideal partner, my ideal mate. If he hadn't slain my father, that is.

Furious, I glare at him.

He responds by licking his lips gleefully, as if impatient to play out his dreams upon me. I shivered, for his glistening lips promise me a night that I would never forget. Suddenly, I am no longer certain if what I am feeling is the thrill of fear.

"I can see and hear your pulse. Your heart is thundering, girl. That's fear" he grinned. "But not only."

How does he know? My eyes bulge, until they're bigger than plates. Can he read my mind?

I'm not really surprised as he pulls a black silk scarf from his pocket. He lets it glide across my bare skin, all the while gauging my every twitch and tick. Then he leans over until our faces are but a hair's breadth apart.

"I've tied you up, until you bind yourself to me out of your own free will" he whispers, his breath stroking my lips. "I will rob you of your sight, abandoning you to your other senses, until you've grown accustomed to my touch."

I shut my eyes, not wanting to reveal my turmoil.

His tongue flutters over my eyelids.

"Will that tame you, girl?" His breath kisses my face. His lips touch mine for but a second. "Can you grow to love my touch? Can you grow to yearn for me as I yearn for you?"

He must be utterly delusional!

"You can't own a human being like you can own a dog!" My voice is shaky. I cringe inwardly.

I am answered by soft melodious laughter. I refuse to open my eyes, out of sheer spite.

Tilting my head back, he ties the scarf on tight. The red darkness behind my eyelids is replaced with oblivion.

"I will dominate your every thought, girl. Every last one."

God damn it! That's already happened. Ever since I found out who he was.

"Body and soul!" It sounds like a promise - a vow whispered to my blood.

I hear a plaintive mewl. A few seconds pass before I identify as mine own. And yet...

I flinch as he touches me. Tenderly.

"You didn't reckon with that, did you, little girl?" Even his voice is warm.

"Don't call me that!" I hiss.

"Don't call you what?" He sounds amused. Merry.

"Little girl."

"As you wish." He chuckles. I can almost feel it thrum through my body.

"My wife!" he amends, sounding vastly pleased.

I keep quiet. These last two words are like an appalling revelation. I see what he desires. I press my lips together. He won't hear another word from me.

He answers my silence with his gloved hands, which rove over my body. There is enough strength there to prove that I am at the mercy of his wicked game. Yet there is also gentleness and seduction.

“Let yourself go!” The demand is tight and warm in my ear. “There’s nothing you can do.”

He must have removed his gloves because I can briefly feel his bare hands flutter across my skin and then pull back, like a moth leaving the flame. His touch is so light and soft it gives me gooseflesh.

The way my body talks to him, pleases him immensely.

“You never had a chance. You belonged to me from the moment I desired you.”

I struggle to remain indifferent to his words and caresses.

I recoil, when a few minutes later something moist and warm strokes my belly. But it is soon gone, replaced by something direly cold.

I moan, sucking for breath.

Displaying great care, he sweeps the sponge across my belly. Now and again he replaces the soft warmth with something biting cold. The contrast is so exquisitely painful, that it tears a whimper from my lips.

He knows how to play people. The thought seizes me as he removes the icy damp sponge, replacing it with his long warm breath.

I can feel his stubble scratching lightly against my inflamed skin. And at that moment I can no longer delude myself. It is *not* unpleasant.

His breath wafts over my damp body: tickling my toes, brushing my inner thighs and stroking my stomach before alighting on my nipples.

Hovering over my nipples, he touches them with the cold sponge.

I scream. Yet before the iciness begins to bite, he takes one of my nipples into his warm mouth, fondling it with his tongue.

"I want you. I want this. So does your body. Feel how exquisite it all is!" he whispers against my other nipple. He hasn't even touched it, yet it assumes the soldier's stance: upright and firm.

He kisses it lightly, playfully.

"Give in, girl. Give in to me." His breath is tight and hoarse.

I feel his lips upon my neck. Ravenous kisses. Conquering kisses. Torture.

He pulls back somewhat. Then I feel him against my inner thighs, burning them with kisses that nip. Slowly, he progresses upwards, leaving not a single inch of flesh unattended.

"You don't have to be ashamed. Admit that you like it", he murmurs against my upper thigh.

I try to melt into the mattress. Without success.

His breath brushes that most sensitive part of my body, leaving behind a distressing, longing ache.

My every limb is trembling. I can't take any more. My body is of another opinion.

"This is far more ancient than reason. You cannot win."

My body rises to meet him as his finger parts my labial folds.

"Let me show you the abyssal depths of your longing."

Good god! I'm panting like an over-eager whore. And he hasn't even touched the nub of my desire.

He does so, with a flick of his tongue.

Oh lord!

I try to squirm off the bed, but I'm still tied down.

"Enjoy it!"

He pins me against the mattress. A lord and his serf.

I leap against the bonds as he returns his attention to my wetness.

Were I free, I cannot guarantee that I wouldn't have dug my fingers into his hair and yanked him tighter to me.

If there ever is to be an eight deadly sin, it should be  
"Thou shalt not covet thy father's murderer."

A reedy whine burst from my lips as his thumb touches that tiny bud of flesh nestled between my labia. A warm turbulent wave threatens to drown me.

I am no longer in control. My body has betrayed me.

Divining my inner turmoil, he stifles it with a deft turn of his thumb.

I moan and buck as the wave closes over me.

I can feel the tears burning down my cheeks. He offers me a few moments of respite. Moments during which my reason gives me a scathing tongue-lashing: "You found him alluring even before you knew who he was. And that hasn't changed a bit since then."

My conscience finds me guilty, stressing the horror of such an unforgivable act.

I start as he slips off the scarf, letting it glide down my cheeks.

My tears don't seem to bother him.

"Now, you are my beloved."

The claim is uttered with a sense of utter contentment. And the way he stressed "my" reveals that he has swallowed the rumors that Francois was my supposed lover. Only three people knew that he had been my father.

I do not want to rob him of his delusion. It might be my only means of escape.

"I will never let you go. Ever!"

Can he read my mind? Confused, I open my eyes.

“Don’t stare at me like that! I also shall never get enough of you!”

He breaks out into warm cheery laughter as his eyes glide over my body. When did he learn to laugh like that?

My stomach clenches.

“You belong to me. Soon you will know no other life.” He promises. Suddenly I’m terrified that he may just have spoken the truth.

I shut my eyes. At least I can escape him thus. For a while.

He breathes gently against my chest and my body reacts instantly. I give a terrified gasp.

How can he exert such power over me?

I keep my eyes shut as he shift his weight and looms over me. I do not wish to see his mocking face while I writhe beneath him. To meet or escape him? The thought dizzies me.

I can feel his lust as his shaft slips between my labia – again and again – tantalizing that most sensitive and vulnerable part of me.

A sigh escapes me. My entire body shakes, begging for release. I can feel how it wants this and I can no longer resist. I’m losing this game.



When he finally penetrates me, I nearly welcome the invasion, for at least my body will finally get what it's been craving.

I hear my own startled scream as the pain, gnawing and wild, chews through my body.

My eyes snap open only to have my gaze trapped in his. He freezes between thrusts, seemingly bewildered. Then his lips stretch into a satisfied grin, before twisting into a sneer.

"You were never his lover!" Was it just me or did his voice snarl with disappointment?

He pulls clear of me. Something in his eyes has changed. Both dimmed and brightened.

He scoops up the knife lying by the bedside.

I shut my eyes in order to conceal my disappointment. Am I nothing but a trophy to him? The erstwhile possession of a man he had slain in order to claim it as his own?

If I am to die now, then I wish to do so without seeing his face. Somehow my disappointment leaves me saddled with guilt.

I hear the knife carve through flesh. My nostrils fill with the reek of blood. But I feel nothing. I take an involuntary breath. No slashed throat.

I open my eyes and see his blood-smeared hand. As if he were but waiting for this moment, he seizes his iron

erection, which is already stained with my plaintive blood, and intermingles our life-flows.

The wound in his hand has already knit.

I stare at him, thunderstruck. I am far too speechless and thus unable to react as he leans over me once again.

“For all eternity!” His words have the ring of a prophecy to them. And I am that prophecy which he is gradually fulfilling.

I feel a bond between us, a bond that transcends the flesh. I shout out. His thoughts invade my head, overrunning me, sounding me out. All while his body consumes me.

“Don’t struggle, girl!” he wordlessly commands, and I comply, giving in to him.

I no longer protest as his lips graze mine, opening my mouth. As a reward, he transforms his kiss into a teasingly arousing flicker of his tongue. It darts forth and draws back until I’m left moaning for more.

My mouth suddenly fills with the coppery tang of blood. But it’s too late and the pain throbs, as if rending my body in twain.

My blood in my mouth, in his mouth; in our mouth.

The pain recedes and I feel my heart beat in step with his, while my blood continues to flow into him.

I taste my blood.

I feel how they fill me: my thoughts and his.

He loosens his grip, there at the edge of death, where he holds my being in his. And for an instant they fuse.

As fresh blood pours into my mouth, he forces me (*You lie*, my conscience hisses) to drink. I feel his excitement and joy. The strength of our blood.

I relinquish body and soul and tumble into the night.

I stir from my erotic daydreaming and stare straight into the dark eyes of the man that has filled my every thought every since I discovered his secret. Is it possible?

His gaze is shrewd and probing.

Guilt rises in me like a dark wave. Never had I had such an intensively erotic dream.

Did my guilt show?

I feel manipulated, as if the dream had sprung from somewhere other than my own mind.

My partner breaks into a triumphant grin, as if he could plumb the depths of my soul.

I suddenly realize that he must have spoken to me, for he is still holding a bottle of water out to me.

I accept it with a slightly trembling hand.

“What’s wrong?”

I take a swallow of the water to calm my nerves.

He makes no effort to conceal that irritatingly piercing gaze which noticed that something had changed between us.

“Sorry,” I mumble. I feel guilty. Caught red-handed.

Why the hell did I dream of him? Because he’s dangerous? Him, the most intelligent man I have ever met?

I can’t keep myself from staring.

Why does he fascinate me so? Is it because he gazes at me in wonder and awe when he thinks I’m not looking? Because he has killed my father? Is hate a force of attraction?

“I was just thinking away.” I’m astonished by how easily the excuse comes to me and how true it rings. Luckily the cab stops at that moment, interrupting our conversation. He smiles smugly and steps out before me. Turning, he gives me his hand and helps me out.

His movements are graceful, feline. Like those of a hunter or wildcat. He can’t really be a vampire, can he?

Nervous, I run my tongue over my lips.

The cab pulls away, leaving us alone before the house into which I wish to lure him. Everything is so different than in my daydreams. Darker.

The fact suddenly strikes me, that I’ve never seen him in daylight. God damn it, I don’t believe in myths!

Guilt ridden, I recall my erotic fantasy.

He fascinates you and you feel drawn to him, although he slew your father. *Just because you can't live with that fact, my conscience sneers with cold and ugly logic, you tell yourself that he is a vampire - a supernatural being you cannot resist.*

"About me?" his stare is hawkish. He can't know?

I'm suddenly afraid of him. Afraid, that he'll make that dream come true. His gaze is cool and knowing, as if he is able to discern my inner struggle and savor it.

"Why you?" I manage to remain amazingly composed. As if looking from the outside in, I see that he's still holding my hand. I didn't even realize it until then.

"Liar!" He utters the word with relish, taking a step closer. He moves with such swiftness that I stagger backwards.

He is still gripping my hand.

"You know!" It is a statement – not a question.

I try to move, but my legs buckle. He slings his arm around my waist and holds me upright.

"What did you dream of?" His breath tickles my ear.

He catches me as my vision darkens. Try as I might, I can't move.

My sudden weakness doesn't seem to concern him. It was the blasted water!

He scoops me up with stunning ease and carries me – not where I wanted.

My thoughts become sluggish.

It's only when he lays me on a bed somewhere that I briefly regain consciousness. Just long enough to hear his last words.

“And now I will show what I dreamt of.”

I experience a sharp jerk as he ties my arms to the bed frame...before slipping back into oblivion.

# Gods in Commuter Land

by Kimberly Sue

*Blondie's diary. May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005*

When regarding religion I'm pretty open-minded. Yeah, another confession: I was raised in mesh of Jewish and Christian ideals but my life long fascination of ancient Norse faith remains.

The Norse god of the storms, Thor, is also known for his protection of the common man. I love his appearance. Thor is bear-like and red-bearded, and his crude attire included an iron belt and gloves. These last two items allowed him to tote the biggest hammer you'd ever see.

Well, maybe you didn't, but I sure did. *Really!* I saw that hammer and Thor alright. Swear to God – uh - Odin.

I've commuted between Long Island and Manhattan for a few years now. The daily trek involves two subways and a commuter train.

And it goes something like this:

I'm thrown through the doors of the Eastbound L.I.R.R.'s 3:42 as the warning bell sounds, thanks two line-backer built suits eager to make this train. This football tactic comes thanks to the one-two trip-up of the 42nd street shuttle and subsequent stalled number 1 train.

Tapping against the floor and door of the 1, curses and grunting accompanied my percussion. This, sadly, is the usual dashing commuter business for so many of us. Now on the 3:42 p.m. train one notes the final exodus of burly construction workers. I like these guys. They come across real, you know? And they liked me. We talked to pass the time. Our conversations? Well, these machine-shop graduates are anything but boring.

Yeah, you'd get the usual off-color jokes, life on the job, beer, sports, and 'nice boobs' stuff. And then some more: family life, economics and politics.

I'm Blondie because of my platinum-hair, and my habit to paraphrase Clint Eastwood's *The Good The Bad and The Ugly* dialog.

One such construction worker - Big Red - wasn't a regular on the train, but whenever he was, he'd sit by me. Big Red seemed fascinated by the crude hammer pendant slung about my neck. The online retailer described it as "*Thor's War-Hammer*". This due to the engraving of God of the Storms' favored battle runes.

Everyone else thought it was some quirky piece, but Big Red knew otherwise. His eyes brightened when he looked at it. He never inquired about it. Big Red simply smiled through that braided beard of his as he studied the hammer.



As this happened I would quietly watch him. People - watching was another way to kill time on the train. So I tried to take in all the details about Big Red without gawking.

When he sat down, I noted how much space he occupied. The man was a monolith, but *not* the missing link. A lot of men who grow beyond a certain height have this sort of Neanderthal brow, but Big Red didn't. I figured he was a war vet from the ragged scars running the length of his brawny forearms. He'd talk of battle, too. I never broached the subject, because the man looked almost old enough to have survived a tour in 'Nam. I just let him talk. This had a bonding effect, allowing Big Red to trust me.

So I know where he's at, because my uncle's a Vietnam vet and his war stories never stopped even after he came home.

Yeah, I know, get on with it. Yeah diary, I confess, I found Big Red attractive because...well, I have this thing for big guys with long hair and beards. You know all about that, diary.

So here's a guy who stokes my huge crush on Zakk Wylde -the *Black Label Society* guitarist/singer. Big Red could be Wylde's doppelganger, except for a few minor details.

I wanted to know 'Zakk's twin', but it soon grew beyond that. Unlike the other guys on the train, Big Red *always* treated me like a lady, referring to me as his valkyrie-in-arms. I really liked that. When we did talk it was about everything in soft, lively tones.

I found it cute that he would answer with "Verily, yea, nay, thee and thou." Was he doing this because he was trying to impress me, or was really this Big Red's true speech?

I never found out.

About 15 minutes out from Manhattan's Penn Station, our train began to slow down. The lights flickered on and off. We crawled along for a few minutes before coming to a complete dead stop. Now in the dark, the crew announced what would become a laundry list of reasons for the flat-lined train.

The usual barrage of cell phone calls began, while other people cursed, joked and sighed. Big Red and I kept talking.

Conflicting announcements brought nothing but frustration. Time passed pretty slowly, we weren't going anywhere. Regular riders around me laughed when I said: "Where's Thor when you need him?!"

I said *that*!?! I don't remember that at all. I *do* remember tracing the raised runes on my pendant though.

Magic, I didn't believe in it.

Myths the same thing.

I just thought Thor and his hammer were cool. Oh, and diary, I liked the idea of a common man's god.

Anyway, where was I? Some folks laughed before it became so dark we couldn't see. Not the lights from the surrounding landscape outside, nor the glow from cell

phones or computer screens: nothing. It was pretty eerie. Then, I noted a shift in the seats where Big Red and I sat. He'd stood up.

A conductor passed and words were exchanged. We couldn't hear.

I traced the rune again. I did this frequently out of habit. The feel of the hand-worked metal comforts me, especially when I'm nervous - a twist on my older sister's habit of twirling her hair.

The train door opened, but we couldn't see who exited.

A few moments later, a great thunderous crash sounded just beyond the train. Thinking terrorism, some folks panicked. I heard praying, crying.

Me? Well I kept tracing the rune, straining through the window into the sea of darkness. Trying NOT to think of 9-1-1. And like everyone else, trying to make out the cause of the crash.

The massive boom sounded again. On the third report, a brilliant flash of blue-white lightning manifested. This charged the train and the rails.

In that flash, I saw Thor wielding his hammer, Mjolnir. The God of the Storms had summoned lightning, triggering the electrical surge that powered up the train.

As our eyes met, his beard split into that familiar, broad grin. Big Red?! *Thor*. Of course!

Another brilliant blue bolt struck, and with it, went Thor.

As a result, we on. The 3:42 p.m. eastbound train made it home just fine. The dispatcher, crew and everyone else chalked it up a power surge being the problem - and the solution. When I talked to the regulars on the train the next night, no one else remembered seeing a nearly seven foot tall man with long red hair and full, braided beard.

# When Things No Longer Matter

by Rayvn Navarro

To say Frank Marin was anxious was an understatement of supreme proportions. It had taken his two assistants five hours to breach the outer seal of the tomb. Close by - too close for comfort - there was a war going on. There had been reconnaissance planes flying over the area earlier in the day. They were F-16s, by the earth-shattering noise they made, rumbling the bowels of the mountain and causing some crumbling around them. Time was of the essence. He doubted the tomb itself would be booby-trapped. The text said nothing about it, but had accurately described how to get through the booby-traps in the chambers that led into this one. It had also described this sealed room and the sarcophagus contained within it. A text he'd 'given' his left eye to get. It was a small price to pay, in light of what lay on the other side of that seal. Such things no longer mattered.

The sealed doorway was now open. Marin did not give half his sight for nothing. His assistants looked at one another and spoke briefly and hurriedly in their own tongue. They turned to Marin, their eyes wide with fear

and promptly took off. Marin dropped them both without batting his one good eye - grateful that he'd remembered to attach the silencer to his gun. The dum-dums wouldn't go anywhere but into their intended targets. He dropped their corpses down a seemingly bottomless hole in one of the nearby chambers, then returned to his work. He felt a little more like he could breathe easy now.

Marin got out his digital recorder and made a record of the undisturbed tomb. Carefully scanning each and every intricate detail of the magnificently decorated mausoleum buried deep in the mountains of northern Baluchistan. He took an hour or better.

On the wall at the head of the sarcophagus was painted a likeness of what he took to be the ancient *naga* king, Vasuki - the Lord of the Underworld. The painting was fully seven feet tall. He was portrayed there as having a coiled serpentine lower half and a human head and torso. The human upper torso was decorated with wrist cuffs, arm rings and necklaces of what appeared to be gold and fabulous jewels. There were long, coiled earrings in each earlobe - both of which were elongated and pendulous, like Buddha's ear-lobes. This was an indicator of great wisdom, supposedly. Around the figure were painted inscriptions in what Marin recognized as *nagari*, the ancient writing of the Sanskrit language. He was especially careful to capture all of this, as well as the glyphs etched into the top and sides of the sarcophagus lid. Solid granite, yet it was carved and polished as beautifully as fine wood, with a swirling lotus motif around the borders.

There were the usual funerary jars, including some that looked decidedly like canopic jars that would contain

certain organs. On the wall to the right of the sarcophagus was a faded rendition of the symbol of the *kalachakra* - it's colors nearly imperceptible now.

Curiously, there were holes drilled into the stone wall - one in each section of the symbol. Holes big enough to stick two fingers into. They were smooth on their inner surfaces - almost polished. On the opposite wall was a *shri-chakra yantra / mandala*. Once quite intricate in design and detail, complete with *lokapalas* and *shaktis*, it too was now fading.

In fact, it seemed to Marin that all the paint was fading from the walls, as he finished his recording.

The sarcophagus itself was fully twelve feet in length and four feet wide. He set to work, removing the lid of the sarcophagus. His bolt cutters made short work of the nine copper straps that bound it to the body of the stone coffin. They sprung into the air with a thin, echoing thrum. Marin threw the cutters down and they clanged against the stone floor. He put some muscle to the lid and was surprised to find it pivoted open easily. Even more surprised to find that the walls of the large granite sarcophagus were only four inches thick.

A veteran of many often violent mis-adventures in the world of forbidden archeology, and all-around tough guy, it took a lot to make Frank Marin gasp in dis-belief. But there it was. No doubt about it.

"Oh my god. Oh my god," Frank whispered. "Ohhhh, you're...you're beautiful!" A smile spread across his weathered features and he laughed, clapping his hands together. At that moment, another fighter jet flew over the mountains and the earth rumbled around him.

"Stupid bastards. You'd blow up the whole world, wouldn't you?" He dropped to his knees, with his arms draped over the side of the sarcophagus. "All over something that is meaningless compared to this."

Unlike its later Egyptian counterparts, this one had no interior boxes. The corpse had been put directly into the stone casing. There would, in fact be no room for interior boxes, for the skeletal remains were quite large, taking up most of the box. They were in perfect condition, all still articulated. No, there was no doubt about it at all. He was looking at the actual skeletal remains of a race that were thought to be a fable at best. A *naga* - the serpent people. At the time of interment, the lower part of the body appeared to have been coiled in the box, for now the bones of the long serpentine spine lay in a perfect spiral. The skull bore the tell-tale signs of the long head and high sloping brow. The clavicle was proportionately large, as was the rib-cage and male pelvic girdle, indicating a being of great physical power and build.

Fabulous bracelets still circled the heavy arm bones, set with precious and rare gems. There were still marvelous rings on the long thin fingers. Around the neck was a piece of most ingenious design, similar to the necklace of 'spider-man chambers' Ruiz found on the supposed skeletal remains of Viracocha at Sipan. Carefully, he picked one of the chambers up and shook it. It rattled. He knew without looking there would be three golden balls inside each of the ten small 'chambers'. On the 'belly' of each chamber was a face, surrounded by a web-like design of thin metal wires. On the back side was a sort of 'feathered serpent' triskelion - supposedly a representation of the solar wind. The necklace alone was worth more money than even Frank Marin could imagine. Priceless. The coiled golden earrings lay on



either side of the head. There were still bits of flesh and hair clinging to the scalp and skull. The hair was in matted clumps. "Ahhhh, natty-dreds," Frank said to himself. Underneath the body was what appeared to be some sort of feathered cloak.

He took up his recorder again and made a visual record of the interior of the sarcophagus and the skeleton - as well as the other things included in the burial. There were nine large crystals of different colors and lengths, as well as a rather bulky scroll of parchment at the foot of the skeleton. The crystals were clear, milky, red, green, blue, yellow, black, orange and purple. They had been cut and polished, with strange grooves and notches. The black one was most likely obsidian, with it's iridescence. The rest were gemstone quality crystalline spars of amethyst, ruby, emerald, apple-jade, gold-streaked lapis-lazuli, quartz and citrine or topaz. The scroll seemed not to be brittle. It was sealed with wax and imprinted with what appeared to be a five-toed dragon claw, and tied at either end with braided and tasseled cords of red-silk and jade ornaments.

A thought occurred to Frank. He shut off the camcorder and turned around. "Holy shit...." All the painting was gone from the walls. All that remained were the nine holes where the kalachakra had been. Nine holes and nine crystals. He recalled each of the holes was drilled into a different colored portion of the symbol. The impetus to try fitting the crystals into the holes came over him. He went back to where he'd documented that portion of the wall and replayed it, looking at the colors. He managed to fit all the crystals into what he was certain were the correct holes and even documented which crystals were in which holes. But nothing happened.

Frank removed the crystals from the holes, puzzled. There had to be something else that activated the crystals and no doubt it was contained in detail in the scroll and in the writings on the walls. He packed up all the treasures from the coffin, stripping the once great *naga* king of his jewelry. The scroll was placed in a tube that could be hermetically sealed. His friend Kashi in Bombay would be more than happy to have a look at all this. Going through the various jars, Frank discovered a life-sized conch shell made of thin brass, some kris knives with jeweled ivory handles; a small cache of lesser but still valuable jewelry and a small *damaru* or drum, shaped like an hourglass.

He replaced the lid on the sarcophagus and got the hell out of there.

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"You found a what? Where?" Kashi knew Marin liked to play jokes on him, but when Frank thrust the CD of his digital document into his hands, he had to see it for himself. Kashi had been studying Sanskrit most all his life. He'd been to Edinburgh and Oxford and published many abstracts and monographs under the name of Pandit A.K. Cooraswami. But Kashi was not your typical nerdy scholar type. He liked to climb mountains and was well-familiar with the place Frank named in the Sulaiman range of Baluchistan. Frank had known Kashi for nigh on to twenty years and he trusted him implicitly.

"A sarcophagus. You wouldn't believe the absolute warren of tunnels and rooms. I'm wondering if maybe I haven't stumbled on some part of Shambhala."

"Shambhala?" Kashi dismissed the thought with a pffft and a rolling of his dark eyes. "Haven't you heard? They don't let you come back if you find that place. Besides, when did anyone around here ever bury their dead in a sarcophagus? We're talking about a country where the dead were excarnated - left out on towers of silence to let the vultures pick their bones clean. They buried the bones in pits or jars - sometimes dividing them up."

"Trust me, Kashi - this one was buried as a corpse in this tomb. Watch. You'll see."

"You need my help!" Kashi exclaimed half-way through the play-back. He giggled and rubbed his hands together, like a delighted child. But Frank hadn't told him exactly what was in the sarcophagus. As the camera moved over the head and upper body, the Hindu ooo'ed and ahhh'd in appreciation of the treasures, but when the camera got to the pelvis and the spine continued in a long serpentine coil, Kashi fell silent. "My god!" He then muttered something about Shiva.

"That's exactly what I said. Twice," Frank grinned. "Ain't he somethin'?"

"You can get back to the cave?"

Marin nodded, then reached down into his satchel and pulled out the scroll in the sealed tube. "I think this is the key to it all. This and what was on the walls. I do need your help, Kashi - and you will be amply rewarded. I even have a contract here. You'll get twenty percent of whatever I can get for this stuff. I've got a couple of "investors" lined up for the jewelry...."

"You're going to sell the *naga*-kings jewelry?" Kashi scratched his head, then shook it slowly. "I don't know if it was a good idea to take it out of there in the first place. They were very 'attached' to their baubles and bangles. This is a little scary, actually."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, they did not bury their dead like this...," Kashi began.

"But this is not a human. Do you know how the *nagas* buried their dead? Not only that, he's a king."

"No, I do not know how the *nagas* buried their dead. No one does. But I am seeing things here *mitra*, that are most disturbing. Most disturbing." Kashi pulled at his thick moustache and watched a portion of the replay again. "I will translate this for you, but I want no part of the rest. Whatever you chose to do with it is your karma, not mine."

Frank rolled his eyes. "You're still involved - directly or indirectly. How long do you think it will take?"

"Perhaps two weeks. It depends on how much is on the scroll. The walls, I can have in the next three days or so."

"No quicker than that?"

"I am a man, not a computer," Kashi grinned. "May I keep the CD?"

"It's yours." There were three more copies of it in different bank vaults in Bombay.

By agreement, Kashi was to call Marin when he began the scroll. Marin wanted to photo-document it, as well. As Kashi removed the seal intact, and they carefully unrolled it, Frank recorded the strange, squiggly characters painted in dark red ink on the vellum. They had a battery of tests done on the ink and it came back as blood. Human blood.

What was on the scroll amounted to a very detailed ritual, which included the blood-sacrifice of a human and a goat. The combined blood was to be mixed with several ingredients that were mostly available...if one knew where to get such things as crystallized cobra venom, powdered rhino-horn, gold dust, mercury and certain herbs. Four lamps of burning *ghee* were to be placed at each corner of the sarcophagus. The *kalachakra* was then to be re-painted on the wall with the blood, while chanting specific *mantram* that were given in the text. The crystals were then to be put in the proper holes. The remainder of the mixture was to be poured over the skeletal remains, while certain other *mantram* were recited. Once this was accomplished, the 'priest' and his assistant were to blow on the brass conch and beat the *damaru* until the crystals began to vibrate. It was stated that the crystals would generate a beam of sound that would awaken the sleeping *naga* king and restore him to life.

"This all sounds soooo wild!" Frank exclaimed several times as he poured through Kashi's translations. "Can you imagine?"

"It gives me the shivers," Kashi said. "I don't like it. Not one bit. You aren't thinking of doing this, are you?" He gripped Frank's muscular forearm. "Please! Tell me that you are not thinking of this."

Frank looked at his long time acquaintance, deeply serious. "Why not? I won't just have a lifeless skeleton to prove the *nagas* were real. I'll have a living, breathing serpent-king."

"Oh, and I suppose you will take him on David Letterman and Sixty Minutes and have Barbara Walters interview him. Parade him around the world like a circus-freak?! Do you have any idea what you might be dealing with here, my friend? The *nagas* were great adepts...very wise...."

"Yeah, back in the day...," Frank interjected, growing impatient with Kashi's hesitation to become completely enthralled by the grandeur of his idea.

"They knew how to make ships that went on land, sea and air. They knew how to make sonic weapons and tools. How to use sound to move things...and shatter things. Huge rocks. How do you think they made all those tunnels in the mountains? Drilled the holes in the wall for the crystals? Cut the crystals? They knew things we still haven't figured out. You make a mistake to think that he will be your docile companion on a great adventure. I can see them making a movie of it in Bollywood, right this minute. It will be like "King Kong" revisited. You are insane, my friend. Completely lost your mind. Please. The goat sacrifice is bad enough, but..."

"I told you, Kashi - your work is done. You needn't bother yourself about doing anything further with it. It's all mine now. I shall no longer require your services." There was the click of a safety being released and the nearly silent ping of a dum-dum bullet exploding out of the muffled .45 under the table.

Gut-shot and bleeding to death, Kashi watched Frank Marin clean everything from the table and retrieve the scroll. With his last breath, he saw Frank wipe his hard-drive clean.

Human sacrifice was no big deal. Not with something like this at stake.

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The war was over by the time Frank went back into the mountains with his supplies. All but the endless political sheep-dip about re-building and new alliances for the betterment of the Middle and Far East.

There was a small and remote village near the entrance to the underworld. They had goats and they had children. That would be his last stop before going in. He'd steal the goat one night and the human victim the next. A teenager would be the best, he reasoned - in the prime of youth and health. Yes, that would be best.

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Frank had practiced the necessary *mantram* and their pronunciation, until they rolled off his tongue as readily as Mary Had a Little Lamb. He'd blown the brass conch and found that no matter how he held his lips or how much or how little air he blew into it, it only produced one deep and resonant note. Apparently, this note was a sympathetic vibration to the crystals. He'd also fashioned a sort of tripod on which to place the conch, so he could play the *damaru* as he blew the brass shell. The drum was a bit tricky, as it was beaten by a knotted cord that was tied around the thin waist of the drum. Moving his hand

in an even rocking rhythm, he was finally able to sustain good steady beat.

Once the sacrifices were completed and the victims bled, Frank lit the four butter lamps, speaking the fire *bija-mantra* - *ram*. Using a hand-written cheat-sheet, he assembled the proper ingredients and began measuring them into the bowl as he chanted almost without thinking. The mixture began to foment and thicken as he continued chanting and stirred it with a large hand-made camel hair paint brush. He'd also practiced drawing the *kalachakra* sigil many times over a mock up of the holes on graph paper. He could draw it in his sleep. In fact, he would often become aware of seeing it in his dreams...when he deigned to sleep.

He had become a man possessed and obsessed over the last two months as he gathered the needed items for the ritual. He'd even gone so far as to quit smoking, eat only rice and drink only water to purify his body. This was his big opportunity and he wasn't going to blow it. Vasuki - or whoever he was, would live again and a whole ancient world of knowledge would be opened to mankind. There was no need for Kashi to explain anything about them, that last fateful day in his study. Frank Marin already knew everything a mortal man could know about the serpent-people. He'd grown up in Katmandu in a proper British family, raised by an old Nepali nanny who filled his head with myths and legends of the *nagas* since he was knee-high to a locust. He'd drawn them and made up stories of his own about them. In those stories, he would find their legendary home of Patala or Sutala and they would welcome him into their midst and make him one of their own. He'd taken up archeological studies and the studies of ancient languages and writings at the university, with just this moment in mind. He'd gone



home, after graduating, to find his father dying. The Kashmiri conflict was brewing hot and heavy to the west and the Chinese were on the prowl again in search of rogue Buddhist monks in Nepal. Much against her will, he shipped his mum back to London and watched his father die. The old man wanted to be buried in Kashmir, and bury him there Frank did. In the meantime, he began to see things and hear about things that the human mind can barely tolerate. Atrocities unimaginable. He'd gone back to Egypt and the Sudan for a time, then returned to Benares, late in 2000.

When the old Arab in Benares told him that he had access to a very ancient document that purported to tell of the location of the fabled treasures of the *nagas*, Frank had assumed it was some kind of scam. The Arab wanted a hundred thousand dollars for it. Frank had the money, having just sold some tasty Old Kingdom Egyptian artifacts from Saqqara to a rich American banker - but he didn't feel like spending it. Turned out, getting it wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be. The old man had two strapping young sons who didn't take kindly to their father being knocked unconscious and his 'treasure map' stolen. Frank killed them both, but not before one jabbed two fingers into his left eye and ripped out his eye-ball. Dr. Malina had fit him with a glass eye, but it made him look too shifty and strange. Besides, the ladies found the eye-patch a bit of a lure and a chat-me-up.

Yes, this was the culmination of a lifetime of work. All here. All now.

Frank placed the crystals into their proper holes and spoke the *mantra* for each one. He watched in amazement as they seemed to soak the still wet blood mixture from the wall and began to glow. Even the smooth obsidian

one glowed a bizarre sort of iridescent black light. Once again, the wall was barren stone, except for the crystals now protruding out of it. He turned and slowly poured the remainder of the sacrifice over the skeleton lying in the great sarcophagus, chanting the required words. With this done, he moved to the tripod with the conch. It was set on the opposite side of the coffin from the crystals and pointed directly at them. He'd been practicing breathing, too - as well as *khum bhata*, the holding of the breath and circular breathing. He had to be able to sustain the note for as long as possible.

He put his lips to the delicate fluted opening of the brass instrument and began to move his hand with the drum. The beat was to start slowly and then build and sustain. Once the beat was sustained, he would blow the conch. Frank blew until he felt he would pass out, but suddenly the crystals began to hum. Their vibration filled the chamber with an eerie hum that could be felt more than heard. Frank felt the sound piercing his flesh and his organs. It fell against his eardrums like an internal buzzing of harmonically attuned bees. The tones so unnerved him in the sensations they produced in his body that for a moment, he quite forgot about the *naga* king. His whole frame began to resonate in unison with the primordial chord that permeated even the dense rock.

He became aware of the fact that there was now a red and black swirling mist rising up out of the sarcophagus. Or was it descending into it? It was difficult to tell. Sparks and flashes of blue-white lightning began to fritter between the crystals in the wall. The air in the tomb filled with ozone as the charge grew in intensity and a bolt of light arced into the rumbling and growling miasma that was congealing in the stone box. The effect

was like watching a string of fire-crackers ignite in slow motion, as chains of carbon atoms formed in front of his eyes in unbelievable clarity and beauty. It was like watching the first instant of Life being created out of the primordial ooze through the eyes of a god. Whatever happened next, this alone was worth the price of admission. Frank felt transported to the beginning of Time, watching the birth of Existence.

The crystals seemed to have discharged all their energy and fell dark, but there was no lack of electrical activity coming out of the sarcophagus. The Beginning now seemed to be encapsulated in a spinning orb of matter and light that fought to stay coherent in form. Frank began to chant again, knowing intuitively that this was what he had to do to help it remain cohesive. Now streamers of white, aetheric light began to pour down through the two miles of rock over his head and bombard the orb. It began to elongate and solidify. There was then a tremendous zzzzttrrr sound as the soul was sealed in the body and the swirling mists fell away. There, rising up before him was the most astounding and beautiful creature he'd ever seen. Frank Marin fell to his knees and bowed his head before the shining golden-skinned *naga*. He felt its long, graceful fingers curl into his unkempt mane and lift his head. His one good eye looked upon the most remarkable face. The golden heavily-lidded serpentine eyes stared down through his skin -- into his mind and soul. Deep-set above high and perfect cheek-bones, those eyes could see through anything. "You have left me naked, Marin," it said in a profound and stern voice. The *naga* let go of his hair with a disdainful flick of its bare wrist.

It knew his name. Frank brushed the thought aside and reached for the goods, stowed safely at his knee in a

chamois pouch and presented them to the serpent-king. "My Lord - your possessions." He'd never intended to sell them. He'd only said that to ensure Kashi's cooperation in anticipation of a sweet reward.

Frank watched the *naga* retrieve his treasures from the pouch and put them on - exactly as they'd been. All but the chambered necklace. "Who are you?" Frank ventured to ask.

As the *naga* deftly undid the webbed wires of the final chamber on the left, he explained that he was indeed Vasuki, *Niraya-pati*, the Lord of the Seven Hells, which included Earth. He held the chamber down for Frank to see. Inside it were two marble-sized golden balls that looked like split-shot. Not three. "I am called many things," he said in his soft, hissing voice. "You see, Marin - there are only two golden balls, and not three. Where do you think that third one might be?"

"Not me. I didn't take it." For a moment, Frank entertained the thought of Kashi somehow managing to undo the chamber and taking one of the balls. But that made no sense at all.

"Ah, but it is you," the Lord of the Seven Hells smiled. He reached out and laid his palm over Frank's fast-beating heart. "I need thirty golden balls, not 29. Not 31. You have served me well, Frank Marin, and now it is time for your reward. You always did want to become one of us, did you not?"

Frank nodded. A strange warmth radiated from the *naga* king's hand on his bare breast. It felt as if his heart were melting - or rather, congealing into a hard, cold lump. Or maybe it had been all along and he was only now

becoming aware of it. Just as it felt that it could compress itself no further, the *naga* reached up behind his ear with an elegant flourish of his hand and pulled forth a golden ball that looked like split-shot. The bi-valve of the heart, compressed into spheroid shape. He thought he saw it throb one last time and was reminded of the thousands who died at the hands of the Aztec priests on altars of stone high atop the pyramid temples. Their chests shrived open by obsidian knives harder and finer than modern surgical blades. Their still-beating hearts ripped out and held up to the Sun as an offering. A seemingly incongruous thought, as the cave and everything else warped into a dark void. He became aware that the *naga* was speaking again, it's voice hissing in his head.

"You'll have no further need of this, or your soul. I've set it free. Squeezed it out - as it were. There can only be one of each to a cage of flesh, you know." Vasuki dropped the ball into the chamber and re-fastened the golden wires. He held the necklace up and shook it, letting the balls tinkle and chime in the chambers, before putting it around his neck again. "Technically, you're dead," he heard the *naga* say, "except that I still require your memories to feed on until I regain my strength. When I find someone more suitable to my royal nature, I shall throw you away - just as you have thrown away everyone who ever helped you. I think it's only fair? Don't you? I really *am* a fair-minded individual!" The *naga*'s form began then to dissipate into a thick golden mist - jewelry and all.

*This isn't a bad body. Strong. Still a few more good years. Aye, it'll do fine for now.*

Frank Marin blinked, shrugging off his ceremonial robe - some knock-off cheap silk kimono from Taiwan. It was over. There was still a very strange looking skeleton in

the sarcophagus. The beautiful cloak of peacock feathers was destroyed by the sacrificial mixture. He put on his mountain gear, and took down the crystals from the wall. They went in the chamois bag. Had it all been for naught? The sacrifices? The ritual? All his hard work? He burned the scroll. He wouldn't be needing that any more.

*Humans are so easily manipulated by their greed for power and wealth.*

"Huh?" Frank looked around the cave. "Who's there?"

There was no answer.

In one final gesture before leaving the tomb, Frank Marin lifted the patch from his eye and tossed it into the sarcophagus. The socket was no longer empty. There was now a beautiful green, gold and copper plated serpent's eye with a long black dilated slit. The eye changed color, becoming brown and quite ordinary like Frank's right eye. The slit compressed into a round iris.

*And you were worried about the glass eye looking odd.*

"What...?" Was he going nuts? Or was this place haunted? Frank peered into the sarcophagus again, staring at his eye-patch. Why had he taken it off? Even stranger than that, he seemed to be able to see just fine in binocular vision. He shrugged to himself, smiling. Maybe something good came out of this, afterall! He had his eye back. Not only that, but he felt marvelous...

...as if he'd slept for thousands of years!

# The Magic Wand

by Lili Xavier

“Please, please, please, please, Gramma,” little Duffy pleaded. She put on her best puppy-dog face. “It’s what I really, really want for my birthday, and it’s only thirty-five dollars.” She sat with the fancy brochure in her lap – a catalogue for all things cool from the stories of a certain boy wizard and his friends. She’d been pouring through it for the last hour.

“I don’t know, punkin’. Wouldn’t you rather have a doll?” Irene wondered what her daughter would think about her buying Duffy a ‘magic wand’ for her tenth birthday.

“Nope. If you get me a dolly, Bobby’ll only dis-remember it.” Duffy’s puppy-dog face turned into a pout.

“Dismember, dear, “ Grandma corrected.

“Whatever! I hate Bobby. He’s mean to me.” Duffy put down the book and snuggled into Grandma Irene’s arms.

"I wish I could live with you, Gramma." Of course, she couldn't - but it was worth mentioning at the moment.

Irene rolled her eyes. They'd been through this so many times and she felt bad. Duffy *would* be better off with her in many ways. The child was named after her mother's favorite bar, if that said anything. But Irene was ill and there was no way.... "Alright, sweetie," she sighed, "I'll buy you the wand for your birthday, but you must take very good care of it."

"Oh, I will Gramma! I will! Thank you!" Duffy squealed delightedly. She gave her grandma a gentle but firm hug. "Thank you..." and things began to turn in her mind.

\*\*\*\*\*

Duffy kept the wand in its pretty box, hidden in a recess in the wall of the heater closet. Not in her room. If she kept it in her room, Bobby would find it. She stood in front of the heater closet door now, her little breast heaving in anger and frustration. Bobby had gotten hold of her new favorite cd that Mommy gave her for her birthday and broken it in half. She was beyond crying. Now it was time to get even.

Duffy stormed outside, broken cd in one hand and the wand in the other. Bobby was out in the driveway practicing on his skateboard. She threw the cd at him. "Can't you leave my stuff alone?!" she screamed at him. "Why you always gotta destroy my stuff? I hate you, you bastard asshole!"

Bobby rolled his eyes and sniggered at her, as he dropped down from the edge of his board and popped it up into his hand. "Because you're a pain in my ass,



Duffy. Why dontcha go play in the street? I could be down at Barry's house, but no - I gotta stay here and watch you. What's that in your hand? Your stupid magic wand? What, ya gonna turn me into a frog?" He started toward her with an evil grin on his face.

But Duffy was quicker. She'd been practicing. She lifted the wand and said the magic spell. There was a flash of bright light and the skateboard fell onto the concrete, landing on its edge. Next to it was a frog. The ugliest, nastiest frog you ever did see. Quickly, she looked around. Nobody saw. She ran up to the bewildered looking frog and set the skateboard on its wheels. "You like to skateboard, froggy?" She sat it on the board shivering at the feel of it. "Here, why don't you go play in the street froggy." Gently, but firmly, she pushed the board out into the street, giggling.

The frog jumped off the board, but just then a car drove by.

Mommy was pissed when she got home and Bobby wasn't around. "He's grounded for the next month!" she said, popping open a beer. "Where the hell did he go?" She went out on the front porch and called his name a few times. There was no answer. Mommy saw the broken skateboard lying in the gutter. "Fuck! Now I suppose he'll want another one. Worthless little shit...just like your father." She took a long swig of brew and headed back into the house. He'd come home, eventually. When he did, she'd let him have it.

But Bobby didn't show up that night. He wasn't in his bed the next morning. Mommy drove down to Barry's house in her work clothes. He wasn't there, either. Barry hadn't seen him and neither had Barry's mom. She drove

back home and sent Duffy off to school. She called work and then she called her mother.

"I think he has to be gone for 48 hours before the police will look for him," Irene sighed. It was always something. "Just calm down, Myrna. He's probably off at a friend's house. Why don't you call the school and see if he shows up there?"

Bobby didn't show up at school, either.

The police came on Saturday morning. They looked at the ruined skateboard and took a report. They talked to Duffy. "I turned him into a frog and he got run over in the street," she told them. It wasn't a lie, but she could tell they wanted to laugh when she said it.

"How could you say such a thing!" Mommy chided her hysterically. "Your brother is missing!"

"There is what appears to be a dead frog in the street, ma'am," the nice lady policeman said. "You know how kids are. Vivid imaginations. We'll put out a bulletin." She pulled a card from her breast pocket and wrote a phone number on it. "If you hear anything from him, give us a call. Okay?"

"Sure," Mommy said, wishing they'd go away now.

They did, and she proceeded to get very, very drunk and pass out on the couch around two in the afternoon.

Duffy heated up a Hot-Pocket and poured herself a glass of soda. The house was nice and quiet, now. Mommy had been crying, talking on the phone to Daddy and Gramma. Then she got mad at Duffy for some stupid

little thing and yelled at her. Duffy liked the quiet. It was like eating chocolate to her mouth, for her ears.

Delightful. There was entirely too much noise and chaos in this house. Maybe she could fix that, she thought, as she downed the last of the soda.

Quietly, she went to the heater closet and got out her wand. She went to the couch and gave Mommy's arm a nudge with her finger. Mommy didn't budge. Good. Duffy lifted the wand and with all her heart uttered a new magic spell, while passing the wand over her sleeping mother. "I just want you to quit drinking, Mommy, and be nice and sweet. It's just you and me, now, Mommy. Won't it be nice? We can be happy - just you and me...and Gramma."

Mommy woke up around seven, complained of an awful headache and went to the bathroom to take some aspirin. Duffy fixed her some soup and toast and a cup of tea. Mommy came back into the living room and sat down on the couch. "Awww, Duffy...that's so sweet of you. Thanks."

"You're welcome, Mommy. It'll make you all better." She sat down next to Mommy and turned on the tv. "Your favorite program is on."

"So it is! Let's watch it." Mommy gave Duffy a squeeze. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, baby. It's just been a bad week."

"I know, Mommy. But it'll get better. Promise."

\*\*\*\*\*

It worked. Duffy didn't know why or how, but it did. Mommy never drank again after that day. She even started cooking dinner for the two of them, when she came home from work. At night she would read Duffy a bedtime story. She bought Duffy a new cd to replace the one Bobby had broken, and a new Barbie.

Now there was one more thing Duffy had to do.

"Can I go spend the night at Gramma Irene's, Mommy?" She already had her overnight bag packed – the wand hidden at the bottom under her robe.

"Well, let's call Grandma and see if it's okay."

It was. Mommy drove Duffy to Gramma's house and dropped her off.

That night, as Gramma was sleeping, Duffy crept quietly into her room with her magic wand, and said the same spell that she used on Mommy. "Get all better, Gramma. Don't be sick anymore. I want you to be well."

That next Tuesday, Irene had a doctor's appointment.

Doctor Neville shook her head as she looked at Irene's x-rays. The tumors were gone. Completely and utterly gone. Her blood work was clean, too. It was a miracle. A real honest to goodness miracle! She picked up the phone. "Irene? I've got some great news for you!"

Mommy, Duffy and Gramma Irene went out to dinner that night to celebrate. Duffy smiled to herself. Now things were *really* perfect. She went home and put the wand away in a box in her closet, and never touched it again.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was many years later. Duffy was a woman now. Grandma Irene had passed away quietly in her sleep two years ago, after coming back from a trip to Paris – someplace she'd always wanted to go. Mom had met a nice man and gotten re-married, but then he got transferred to California and Mom went with him. They still talked on the phone, but it wasn't the same...and Duffy always cut it short when she felt like she was going to break down and say something she shouldn't. She didn't want Mom to know about her life now with Mitch. She didn't want Mom to worry about her.

At first, Mitch had been really sweet. He'd bring her flowers and write little poems to her. He'd say the sweetest things and made her feel special. Duffy hadn't wanted to get into a relationship, but he'd won her over. He had his little problems, but didn't everyone?

Then something happened. Duffy was never really sure what it was that set him off, but two months after they started living together, he became an entirely different person. He started drinking. Maybe he always did, but hid it from her, because he knew that her mother used to be a drunk and how much she hated it.

It was Sunday afternoon, and he'd invited a couple of his buddies over to watch the football game. Duffy made snacks and ordered a pizza for the guys. She played the good hostess and then retired to the kitchen to put dinner in the oven for later.

John, Mitch's best friend came into the kitchen during a commercial to get another beer. He stopped and talked to Duffy. "That crab dip you made is excellent," he smiled,

standing close to her. He opened his bottle and tossed the lid in the trash. He leaned down closer. "You're gonna hafta give me the recipe for that, Duff. Mmmm, you smell good. Like roses."

"Um, yeah. I've got the recipe here in the box. I'll copy it down for you." Duffy ignored the complement. It made her feel uneasy. It wasn't the first time John had said something of the sort. "'Scuse me," she smiled tightly, sliding past him with the roast, "I've gotta put this in the oven."

"Mitch is a lucky guy..., " John started.

"What's goin' on, man?" Mitch stood in the doorway of the kitchen. "Better get back in - the commercials'll be over in a minute. You leave Duffy alone, turkey," he winked and punched John in the arm.

That was all there was to it until that night. Duffy was tired after cleaning up all the empty bottles and mess the guys left. She just wanted to go to sleep, but Mitch had other ideas.

"Whatsa matter, Duff? You wanta dream of John? Hmm? I saw you flirting with him in the kitchen," Mitch said accusingly.

"I wasn't flirting. He was, but I wasn't. I'm just tired, Mitch."

Mitch made an unpleasant sound. "Bullshit. I saw how you were lookin' at him."

"He was in my way, I was trying to get dinner on." She rolled onto her back and turned to him. "What's gotten into you, Mitch? You're being a jerk."

He grabbed her and started pulling up her nightgown. "I want some sex, Duff. Is that too much to ask? Maybe you can pretend it's John, instead of me...ungrateful bitch."

"You...!" Duffy made to slap him, but he grabbed her wrist and rolled on top of her. "Get off me, you drunk asshole!" She could smell the beer on him and it made her want to wretch. Duffy struggled.

Mitch slapped her and then he took what he wanted, cursing at her and shaking her the whole time. The next morning he told her she'd better never leave him or he'd hunt her down and kill her...and then *no one* would have her.

That was three months ago. Things hadn't gotten better. He had the phone disconnected and got a cellphone, which he always kept with him. He took her house keys and any bit of money she came by. Now, she couldn't even call her mom.

Duffy stared at her black eye, bruises and cut lip in the mirror. Mitch had insisted that she didn't work. She couldn't even leave if she wanted to. She had no money and nowhere to go. He wouldn't even let her have friends. Tears spilled down her cheeks and she squeezed them back. Things had to change.

Feeling depressed, listless and hurting like hell all over, Duffy went to the closet with the intention of digging out some old pictures of her, Mom and Grandma Irene in better days. Maybe they'd make her feel better. She

rummaged through the box, sneezing at the dust. And there it was - the box with her magic wand.

Her heart raced as she took up one of Mitch's dirty socks and brushed it off. She opened the lid carefully, breathless. She'd forgotten all about it. How, she couldn't imagine. It had made everything better before, when she was a little girl. Then she shivered, remembering the first time she used it. A feeling of profound guilt overtook her. She'd killed Bobby, as sure as if she'd pushed him in front of that car herself. She told the police the truth, but they didn't believe her. In the haze of her pain, she wondered if maybe she didn't imagine it all. Maybe she did push Bobby into the street and he got run over. But there would have been a body. She'd run back into the house after it happened, feeling scared and exhilarated all at once. Maybe...maybe whoever ran him over got out and stole away the evidence of their crime, and dumped the body somewhere where no one would ever find it. Maybe her brother *had* gotten run over by a car, and she'd made up that story about turning him into a frog because she felt guilty for hating him so much and wishing such a thing. Maybe Mom just quit drinking because Bobby wasn't around any more. Bobby looked and acted just like Daddy, and Mom hated their dad with a passion. Maybe all of this was punishment for killing Bobby, all those years ago. So many 'maybes' and no answers.

Maybe Grandma Irene just got better and the wand didn't really do any of those things.

*"Oh stop it," a little voice inside her demanded. "The wand works. You know it does. What have you got to lose, Duff? A few bruises and black eyes? A lot of misery? Do it! You know you want to."*



Duffy put away the photos and the box. She spent the rest of the afternoon trying to compose a proper spell. It didn't come as easily as it did when she was little. Finally, she had it, and she went to put dinner on.

Mitch came home with a twelve-pack, and proceeded to plop his butt down on the couch and turn on the early Monday night game. "When's dinner?" he demanded.

"I'm bringin' it," Duffy said, with new hope welling in her. She twisted off the bottle cap and grabbed up the plate. After tonight, things would be better. She sat the plate, silverware and beer down on the coffee table. *Let 'im drink the whole twelve-pack...as much as he wants.*

By ten o'clock, Mitch was passed out on the couch – just like Mommy had been so long ago. Duffy cleared away the mess and got out her wand. She stood between the couch and the coffee table, wand in hand and took a deep breath. This *had* to work.

*It will work, just believe it will!* the voice inside said.

Duffy uttered the new magic spell, passing the wand back and forth over Mitch's sleeping form.

Nothing happened. Not like what was meant to happen. She did it again.

One eye opened and Mitch blinked. "What the fuck are you doing, you stupid bitch?" He started laughing and reached up to grab her wrist.

A struggle ensued and the wand broke in half. Mitch threw the bottom piece across the room. Duffy screamed, desperate now. The top piece was still in her fist. Then

suddenly, something came over her. Something dark and chaotic. All rational thought flew from her. She felt Mitch's fist connect with her other eye that hadn't been blackened, and then everything exploded inside her. The magic spell spewed from her lips in a voice that was not her own. She heard Mitch scream and then she passed out.

The police had to break down the door. One of their neighbors had called 911.

They found the man sprawled across the couch, with something like the butt-end of a fancy chop-stick protruding from his jugular. There was blood everywhere.

"Oh, man...." The cop knelt down and put his fingers to the woman's throat. She was still alive – just barely. His partner was already calling the para-medics. "Poor thing. No wonder she snapped."

\*\*\*\*\*

The trial didn't last long. Duffy Collins was found not-guilty by reason of self-defense...and insanity. Her mother took her back to California and put her in a sanitarium. She went to visit her daughter once a week. Duffy liked it there. Gramma Irene had come to visit her last night, but Gramma forgot to bring her magic wand. She needed it to get better, she told her mother.

"It's gone, baby." It was in a box somewhere in the basement of the Clark County Sheriff's office in a plastic bag – a murder weapon.

"Oh," Duffy would sigh. "Can I have another one, Mommy? Please, please, please?" She put on her best puppy-dog face. "It's what I really, really want for my birthday. Pleeease?"

Myrna gave in after six months of this. She bought Duffy a magic wand.

"Sorry, Mrs. Harper...no sharp objects," the head orderly said, when she showed it to him.

"Can't I just let her see it? Touch it? You can be right there with me. It means so much to her," Myrna pleaded. "That's all. Just let her touch it. It's for her birthday."

He thought about it, his lips pursed in debate. "I could lose my job, ma'am."

"Please. Please?"

He exhaled a heavy sigh. Duffy was pretty well behaved. She didn't really cause any problems. "Okay. But she can only touch it. She cannot take it out of the box."

"Oh, thank you, Brian. Thank you."

Duffy's face lit up when she saw the box. "Is that what I think it is? My magic wand?"

"Yes, baby...but you can only touch it. You can't take it out of the box," Myrna explained. "Do you promise?"

Duffy nodded, smiling. "That's all I want – just to touch it."

Myrna opened the box, while Brian the orderly hovered beside Duffy, ready to take action if need be.

Duffy's eyes sparkled as she laid her fingers on the wand and began to mutter something under her breath. When she was done, she took her hand away and Myrna closed the box. "Thank you, Mommy. I'll get better now – you just watch and see!" She smiled at Brian. She liked Brian. He was like a big teddy bear and he had the kindest brown eyes. "Thank you, Brian. You were so nice to let Mommy bring me my magic wand."

He got that big stupid grin on his face. "You're welcome, Miss Duffy. And thank you, for behaving."

"Oh, I'm very nice, when I'm not crazy," she giggled.

"You're very nice now," he winked. "We've got some birthday cake for you, Miss Duffy. Would you like to take your mother to the dining room?"

"Surprise!" Only some of the inmates, and the nurses and orderlies said it, but they were all there at the table. That's what counted. Silly Sally blew her party whistle and gave Duffy a big hug.

"Too bad, she's like she is," Nurse Charles leaned over and whispered to Brian. She knew he kind of liked Miss Duffy.

"Yeah," Brian said with a twisted smile. "Too bad." Miss Duffy was a cutie – a cutie who thought she was ten years old today. "She's been through a lot. I pray she gets better. I'd like that."

"Mmmmm-hmmm," Nurse Charles cackled. "I bet you would!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Myrna came to take Duffy home the week before Thanksgiving. It was a miracle. Duffy was Duffy again, not her ten-year old self. She knew Grandma was dead, where she was, and the date. They'd pronounced her cured, but she had to go back for a re-evaluation in three months.

They were unpacking Duffy's things, when Myrna brought her the box with her magic wand. "I thought you might want this, hon," she said.

Duffy shook her head. "No, Momma. Take it away. I don't ever wanta see it again. I don't need it anymore...but thank you for bringing it, when you did. It's the reason I'm home now and well."

Myrna's brow furled. "All right. Whatever you want, Duffy. I'm just glad you're home."

"Me too, Mom." She gave Myrna a hug. "Do me a favor and burn it. Okay?"

"Sure."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was Thanksgiving, and the doorbell rang. "Why don't you get that?" Myrna said, barely suppressing a smile as she lifted the candied yams from the oven.

"Are we having company? I thought it was just going to be you, me and Fred and Nancy," Duffy responded. Nancy was her step-sister.

"Just go open the door, sweetie."

"Hello, Miss Duffy," Brian smiled. He handed her a rose - a single, beautiful pink rose. "How are you?"

Tears welled up in Duffy's eyes and she giggled, throwing her arms around her erstwhile care-giver. "I'm great! And how are you?"

Brian grinned like he always did. "Real, good. Hungry!" He took a long whiff of the smells coming out of the kitchen. "Smells wonderful. You look great!"

A year later, Duffy became Mrs. Brian Wolfe. She did volunteer work at the sanitarium and ate lunch with her husband every day. Silly Sally and Phobic Phil were gone. They'd gotten better too...just like she'd wished they would.







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